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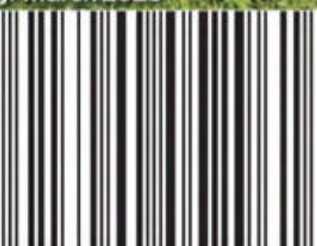
**SUPER RUGBY
PACIFIC/AUPIKI**

**EDDIE JONES
IS BACK!**

THE LAST DANCE

Issue 221
February/March 2023

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PLUS Rob Rush • Liana Mikaele-Tu'u • Billy Harmon • Manaaki Selby-Rickit

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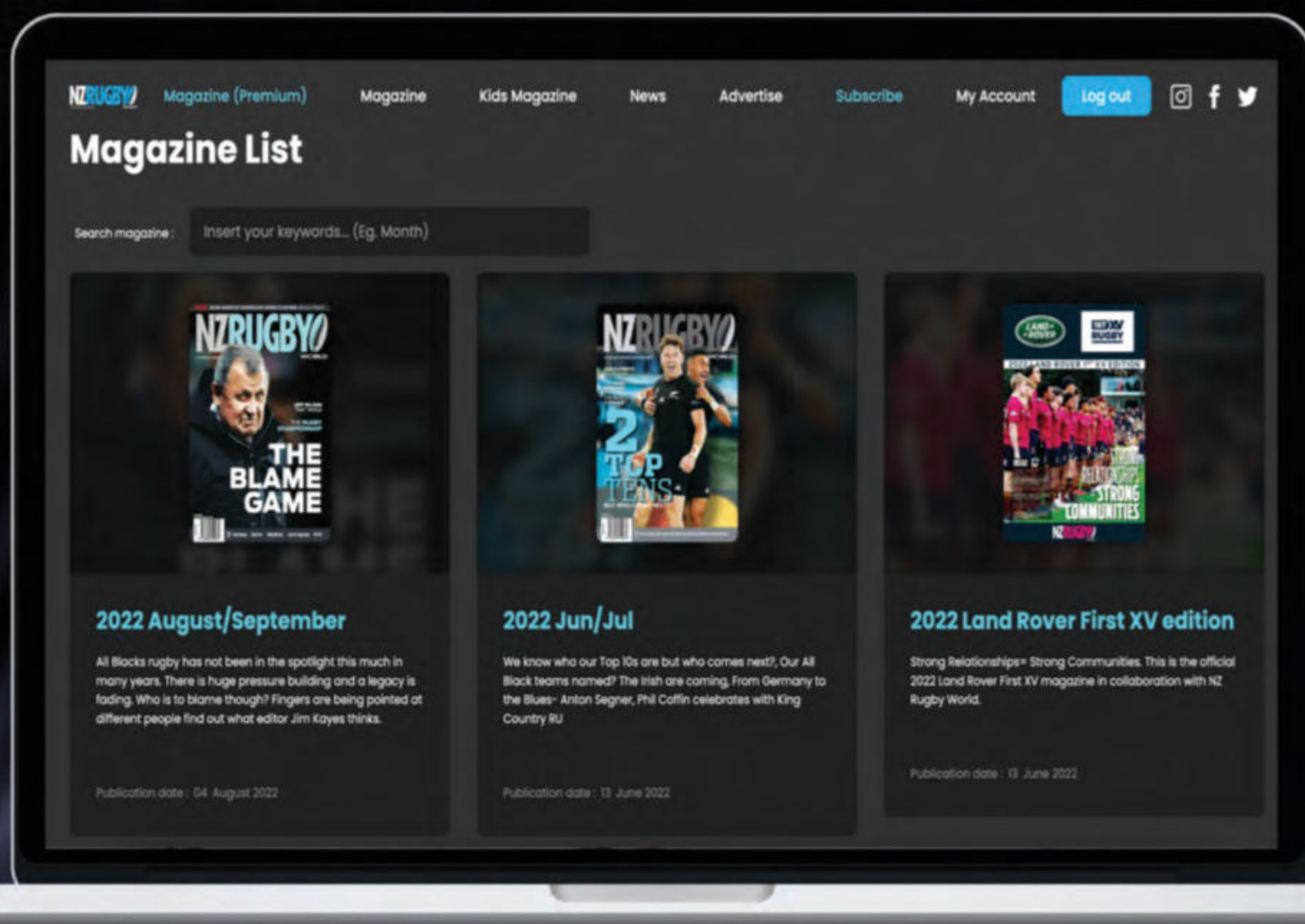
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SCAN ME



EDITOR'S LETTER

jim@nzzrugbyworld.co.nz

Welcome to 2023 - a year that is already historic with the sacking of three international coaches - Eddie Jones, Wayne Pivac and Dave Rennie - with a World Cup firmly on the horizon. It's amazing, especially with Jones who now has a second crack with Australia. Not good enough to coach England but so good he has a five year deal with the Wallabies! The first Bledisloe Cup test will be a cracker.

It's also a year where I am picking the Blues to finally win Super Rugby and the All Blacks to make the semifinals, at least, at the Rugby World Cup.

Ok, take a deep breath Jim because those are two bold predictions.

It's just that surely the Crusaders can't win again and the Blues, well, they have a decent squad, good coaches, and they lost the final last year and there is a saying that you have to lose a final to win one. So fingers crossed.

And with the All Blacks, Jason Ryan's impact on the pack has been significant and if they continue to improve, and Ian Foster gets his selections right, then the All Blacks have the firepower to do well in France.

The reality is two of the four best teams in the world will be out of the tournament after the quarterfinals as it's likely the All Blacks and France will play South Africa and Ireland in the quarters. This could be the All Blacks, but I get the feeling they are heading in the right direction and though South Africa and Ireland are terrific teams, my eternal optimism has the All Blacks going through to the final four. From there, who knows.

Selections are key though and the most talked about position this year will be openside flanker where skipper Sam Cane is under huge pressure from Dalton Papali'i. The midfield is congested especially now that Jordie Barrett has proven he is our best second five. Four midfielders will go to France and at this early stage you'd have to think they are Barrett, David Havili, Anton Lienert-Brown and Rieko Ioane. I'm keen to see Damian McKenzie back with the Chiefs and where he might fit into Foster's plans.

It will also be fascinating to see what happens next with the women's game. Rikki Swannell talked to the new head of women's high performance rugby, Hannah Porter about how NZR will build on last year's World Cup success. Top of Porter's job list will be finding a coach to replace Wayne Smith. My pick is Allan Bunting who enjoyed great success with the Black Ferns Sevens team and was part of Smith's management.

As is always the case, I want to hear from you, the reader, the most important part of this magazine. There are so many issues for you to write about. Who will win Super Rugby Pacific and Aupiki? Who should play in what position for the All Blacks? Who should replace Ian Foster next year? Who should be the new Black Ferns coach? And plenty more.

Drop me a line at jim@nzzrugbyworld.co.nz and you will go in the draw to win one of three superb Qrub Keep Active packs. I have these at home and trust me, they work. Valued at \$134.85, if you use the code IAMHOPE10 when you purchase your own Qrubs from itsorganicdarling.com you will get 10% off and 50% of the sale will go to Mike King's I AM HOPE cause. What better reason can there be to email me and to get buying in the meantime!

Here's one letter that caught my eye. I look forward to getting yours.

Dear Jim

What do the All Black selectors do when Sam Cane is fit? In my opinion Dalton Papali'i was the best No.7 in New Zealand even before Cane's injury. Papali'i has only confirmed my opinion in Cane's absence.

One possibility is to keep both Cane and Papali'i in the squad and give the captaincy to Sam Whitelock through to the World Cup next year.

On a different subject New Zealand Rugby must find a new role for Wayne Smith. It is obvious to all of us what he has achieved with the Black Ferns, and he has said publicly how much he learned, and how much he enjoyed coaching that team. That talent to manage and motivate players must not be lost irrespective of technical rugby coaching.

Regards

Matt Harger



And we have a new contributor here at NZRW with former Black Fern Vania Wolfgramm taking Eroni Clarke's place in our editorial space. What a treat! Vania is a Sky Sport Commentator and the Game Development Manager for Women's Rugby at New Zealand Rugby. She will bring a unique perspective with her thoughts. Her first piece is over the page.

AUPIKI, A CHANCE TO SHINE

WITH THE BLACK FERNS WORLD CUP SUCCESS NOW IN THE PAST, **VANIA WOLFGRAMM** IS EXCITED TO SEE THE MOMENTUM CARRIES INTO SUPER RUGBY AUPIKI.

Talofa lava, Malo e lelei, and Kia Ora tatou... Happy New Year team. I am excited and privileged to be joining the NZ Rugby World team for 2023 and share my passion for rugby. It's been an exciting few months since the end of Rugby World Cup, and I look forward to sharing the latest in women's rugby through a Pacific lens.

As a former Black Fern, I still pinch myself looking back at what was an incredible time to witness the World Cup in our own backyard. From a tournament perspective, it was a massive event that was fully embraced by the whole country. To have sold-out stadiums venues for women is something many of us only dreamed of. Crowds got right behind all 12 teams, swinging their poi and showcasing Aotearoa New Zealand's culture and hospitality to the world. It truly was a phenomenal experience.

And as for our Black Ferns themselves – what an amazing campaign they had. The struggles of the previous 12 months had been well documented and the team, along with the new coaching set up, worked extremely hard on and off the field. They played some exciting rugby, conducted themselves so well under the increased pressure of being the home nation and playing in front of the largest crowds for women's rugby in this

country. I can't be the only one who got emotional watching that final against England at Eden Park – it will live long in the memories of everyone watching. The Black Ferns are now six time World Champions!

The next opportunity to see our wāhine in action will be Sky Super Rugby Aupiki. The competition is now in its second season after COVID disruptions in 2022. I'm really excited to see how things have progressed. We have athletes who have just come off the high of the World Cup, and they will bring that experience of the way the country got behind women's rugby with them. I encourage you to get along to an Aupiki game if you can, or tune in on the TV – every opportunity for women's rugby will be critical from here on, and our athletes need and deserve our support in between World Cups as well.

Aupiki is a necessary step if we want to keep progressing the talent and pathways for our women. The competition is a vital step above the provincial Farah Palmer Cup, and provides a more semi-professional approach. Being involved at New Zealand Rugby, I've seen that it's been difficult to get players from FPC ready for the next level. National coaches have worried about lack of game time, lack of on- and off-field conditioning and the gap in skills from FPC level to Test rugby. With Aupiki now at the beginning of the calendar year, players will be at a higher level of preparation, which will translate to the black jersey, and will only increase as Aupiki continues to grow. And it must continue to grow – with more rounds. I'd love to see the South Island expand to two teams as the player base grows. I would also love to see an additional Māori/Pasifika team. It would provide a playing pathway for another 30-60 players, more opportunities for coaches and support staff as well as adding excitement, flair and culture to our competition.

There's been a lot of player movement between the four teams, most notably from the Blues to Wellington Poua, building a very strong side in the capital. It's also great to see more women in the coaching staff across the competition. We've got two wāhine Māori head coaches in Crystal Kaua (Chiefs Manawa) and Victoria Grant (Hurricanes Poua), World Cup winners Whitney Hansen (set piece) and Amanda Murphy (strength and conditioning) with Matatū, and Linda Itunu coaching the forwards for the Blues.

I am particularly excited for the two-time former World Cup Championship Black Ferns coach Darryl Suasua, as he joins the Chiefs Manawa coaching team. I am interested in not only what he will be able to provide the team and players, but more excited in how he will be able to grow and stretch Kaua as a coach.

It's important to have women involved in the off field set up as they will lead and contribute in creating the best environment for our athletes. As the women's game professionalises, we need to make sure the environments are set up for athletes to succeed. What does high performance look like in the women's space? What do we need to have in place to support families? Last year, we saw some Aupiki teams provide childcare for players who are mums, which is a great start. We've not been in this place before, having babies in professional environments, so we need to make sure we're listening, learning and understanding what best suits each player's situation.

Similarly, we need our environments to be accommodating of our Māori and Pasifika athletes as well. A strong part of the Black Ferns culture review was a lack of representation and understanding of world views. When rugby environments understand different cultures by specifically having Māori and Pasifika women in decision-making positions, we can create environments with the cultural competency to allow all athletes to thrive.

VANIA'S PLAYERS TO WATCH FOR SUPER RUGBY AUPIKI 2023

- **Maama Vaipulu** – Blues
- **Sylvia Brunt** – Blues
- **Tenika Wilson** – Chiefs
- **Dhys Faleafaga** - Chiefs
- **Santos Taumata** – Chiefs
- **Victoria Subritzky-Nafatali** – Hurricanes Poua
- **Sera Naiqama** - Matatū
- **Martha Mataele** - Matatū
- **Georgia Cormick** - Matatū





The Last Dance

Scott Robertson is in his seventh and last season as Crusaders coach. He talked about the season ahead and Jim Kayes looks at who might coach the All Blacks.



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Rob Rush is a Blues rookie with a big future. The son of Sevens legend Eric Rush talked to Jim Kayes and we look at the All Blacks blindside options.

23 Tall Challenge

Manaaki Selby-Rickit walks in big shoes - literally and metaphorically - with his shift from the Highlanders to the Chiefs. He chatted with Jim Kayes.



30 Big Mac

Peter Lakai has been compared to All Blacks No8 Ardie Savea and has a huge future. He talked to Jason Pine about his goals and a unique motivation method when he was a kid.

33 Billy the Captain

Billy Harmon replaces All Blacks great Aaron Smith as Highlanders captain but will have the classy halfback around for a season helping out. Nick Bewley with the story.

RWC 2023: THE COUNTDOWN IS ON.

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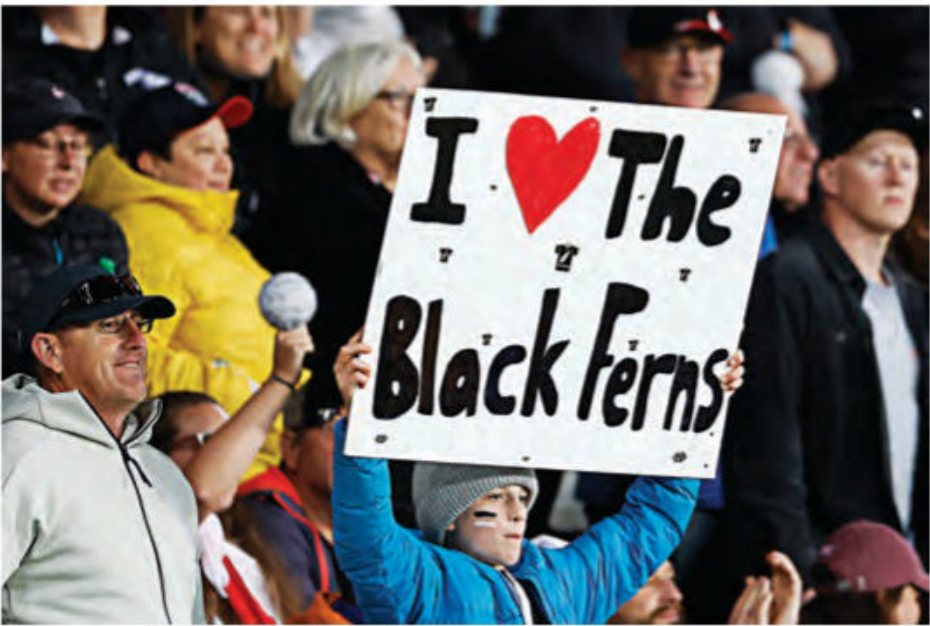


Miracle Man
Miracle Fai'ilagi is the first Moana Pasifika player picked straight out of Samoa into Super Rugby. He talked to Thomas Airey.



44 An Aussie Drought

Can the Australian teams end a long run of no titles in this year's Super Rugby Pacific? Jim Tucker assesses their chances.



72 Staying in Love

With the Black Ferns World Cup victory now a part of history, the challenge is maintaining interest in the women's game. Rikki Swannell talked to Hannah Porter about the road ahead.

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Eddie Jones has made a remarkable return to the Wallabies after he was sacked as England coach. Jim Tucker looks at what impact Australia's prodigal son will have.



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THE LAST DANCE



SCOTT ROBERTSON'S SEVENTH SEASON COACHING THE CRUSADERS WILL BE HIS LAST. HE TALKED TO NZ RUGBY WORLD EDITOR **JIM KAYES** ABOUT THE CHALLENGES AND DISTRACTIONS AHEAD AS HE EYES A 14TH TITLE FOR THE CHRISTCHURCH-BASED CLUB.

Scott Robertson pauses, long enough to fear the phone line has dropped out.

Then, almost in a drawl, he says, “yeah, if things go to plan” and starts to chuckle. “I don’t know what else to add to that.”

I’d asked him if this was his last year with the Crusaders. It is his seventh season as coach and though his contract carries through to next year, Robertson hopes to invoke an out clause that allows him to coach the All Blacks.

Even if he doesn’t get the All Blacks job, Robertson could leave as Scotland is likely to be looking for a head coach and other spots could be vacant after the World Cup in France.

For now, though, he is the firm favourite with many Kiwi rugby fans to replace Ian Foster - heck, many want him there now - and there is increasing speculation he will be appointed before Foster takes the All Blacks to France.

A mature scenario could see New Zealand Rugby appoint Robertson for 2024 and beyond while simultaneously re-endorsing Foster’s World Cup campaign.

But there are other options. Dave Rennie has been sacked as Wallabies coach and Japan’s former All Blacks Jamie Joseph and Tony Brown are reputable alternatives.

Joe Schmidt has taken a great role with the All Blacks since John Plumtree and Brad Mooar were sacked last year and the former Ireland coach is another option.

And what if Foster’s All Blacks win in France? Would he seek a second term? Would victory in France give him universal support?

Robertson, for now, is a prisoner to New Zealand Rugby’s processes and the governing body has not said how and when the coach from 2024 will be appointed.

“There is always an opinion, from the media to the old lady in the library, but the ball is in New Zealand rugby’s court. I will just focus on the team in front of me now.”

That team is the champion Crusaders who have won consecutive titles since Robertson took over in 2017. He has a 23-year history with the club and Canterbury region that includes 86 Super Rugby games from 1996 to 2003 and 69 games for Canterbury in that period.

He coached the province from 2008-2016 first as an assistant and then the boss, and is eyeing a seventh title this year as coach of the Crusaders (he won four as a player).

“I feel like I have been driving to Rugby Park for most of my life,” the 48-year-old says. “This team and this region have been a massive part of my life. It is an absolute pleasure to coach a team you played for and care about.”

Despite his longevity, Robertson

insists his passion remains undiminished and that he is acutely aware of the tone he needs to set and lead - on and off the field.

Central to that, and to staying ahead of the pack, is evolution. That includes the playing and coaching roster, but also how the Crusaders train and go about their business.

“It’s my job to make sure our daily habits are right. You can’t get bored by the daily routine.”

Robertson points to the dynasties that have ruled the world throughout the ages and suggests the Kings and Queens who fell - or were toppled - did so because they became arrogant.

“You have to keep looking for your blindspots and I have people who are always assessing what we do on and off the field.”



Former All Blacks **Jamie Joseph** and **Tony Brown** have enjoyed success coaching Japan and are a strong option to replace Ian Foster at the All Blacks.

CRUSADERS

Hookers: Codie Taylor, Brodie McAlister, George Bell*.

Props: Joe Moody, Oli Jager, Fletcher Newell, George Bower, Tamaiti Williams, Finlay Brewis

Locks: Scott Barrett, Quentin Strange, Mitchell Dunshea, Sam Whitelock, Zach Gallagher

Loose forwards: Tom Christie, Ethan Blackadder, Sione Havili Talitui, Cullen Grace, Dominic Gardiner, Corey Kellow, Christian Lio-Willie*.

Halfbacks: Mitch Drummond, Willie Hienz, Noah Hotham*.

First-five-eighths: Richie Mo’unga, Fergus Burke, Taha Kemara*.

Midfield: Jack Goodhue, David Havili, Braydon Ennor, Dallas McLeod

Outside backs: Chay Fihaki, Sevu Reece, Will Jordan, Leicester Fainga'anuku, Macca Springer*, Melani Nanai, Pepesana Patafilo.

Key Gains: Pepesano Patafilo (Hurricanes), Melani Nanai (Worcester), Willi Heinz (Worcester).

On the move: Pablo Matera (Japan), Bryn Hall (Japan), Simon Hickey (Japan), George Bridge (France), Kini Naholo (Hurricanes).

**Denotes players on a full Super Rugby Pacific contract for the first time.*

2023 DRAW



CRUSADERS

1	CHIEFS	24.02 7.05PM	2	HIGHLANDERS	03.03 8:00PM	3	DRUA	11.03 4.35PM	4	BLUES	18.03 7.05PM	5	BRUMBIES	24.03 7.05PM
6	REDS	31.03 9.35PM	7	MOANA PASIFIKA	07.04 7.05PM	8	BYE ROUND 08		9	REBELS	21.04 9.35PM	10	CHIEFS	29.04 7.05PM
11	WESTERN FORCE	06.05 4.35PM	12	BLUES	13.05 7.05PM	13	MOANA PASIFIKA	19.05 7.05PM	14	WARATAHS	27.05 4.35PM	15	HURRICANES	03.06 7.05PM

*ALL CRUSADERS GAMES LISTED IN NZT

SUPER RUGBY
(MELBOURNE)

HOME
AWAY





**THIS TEAM AND
THIS REGION
HAVE BEEN A MASSIVE
PART OF MY LIFE.
IT IS AN ABSOLUTE
PLEASURE TO COACH A
TEAM YOU PLAYED FOR
AND CARE ABOUT.'**

SCOTT ROBERTSON



Richie Mo'unga has already confirmed this will be his last year at the Crusaders.

One key person missing from the Crusaders this year is forward coach Jason Ryan who made a huge impact when he joined the All Blacks last year. Robertson admits his old mate was a huge influence over the Crusaders pack but is grateful for the legacy he has provided for Dan Perrin to carry on.

And he suggests the Tasman head coach is similar in many respects to Ryan, including the fact both are former butchers.

Winning in a World Cup year is tough as each team has the complication of how they manage their All Blacks, not just as they come back into the team but also as they will inevitably have an eye on France.

The Crusaders are the only team to have two titles in a World Cup year - 1999 and 2019 - with the Blues, Bulls, Reds and Highlanders sharing the other titles.

"We have to help our All Blacks so they have a great year," Robertson says, acknowledging the importance of talking to those players about their form and their roles at the Crusaders.

"You have to front foot it, and the message is that if you are going to the

World Cup as an All Black you have to play well as a Crusader.

"There aren't many tests this year with a shortened Rugby Championship and it's important to keep your form and maintain momentum."

He's right. History shows us that when the All Blacks are overly spared during Super Rugby, they fail at the World Cup. Players are called players because they play the game - not live in a gym.

Robertson's other challenge is that some of his players will leave or retire at the end of the year with star first five Richie Mo'unga already confirming he will play in Japan next year.

Sam Whitelock's future must also be uncertain as the great lock will turn 35 in France and enters his 14th Super season having played 174 games to go with 143 tests.

"Again it's about talking to those players so they know they have to focus on their performances for the Crusaders."

Robertson can't afford for his key players to get distracted or to get ahead of themselves in such an important year.

IF YOU ARE GOING TO THE WORLD CUP AS AN ALL BLACKS YOU HAVE TO PLAY WELL AS A CRUSADER.'

The same can be said for him as the debate around who should coach the All Blacks will only increase as the year goes on.

"I can compartmentalise that, it's ok," Robertson says. "And I get to focus on doing a job I love doing."

If he gets it right Robertson will be dancing again as the Crusaders collect title No14.

What a last dance that will be.

ALL BLACKS

COACH

C O N T E N D E R S



SCOTT ROBERTSON

- Age: 48
- > Crusaders
 - > 101 games
 - > 86 wins
 - > 85%



JOE SCHMIDT

- Age: 57
- > Ireland
 - > 77 games
 - > 55 wins
 - > 71%



JAMIE JOSEPH

- Age: 53
- > Japan
 - > 49 games
 - > 26 wins
 - > 53%



DAVE RENNIE

- Age: 59
- > Australia
 - > 34 games
 - > 13 wins
 - > 38%



IAN FOSTER

- Age: 57
- > New Zealand
 - > 34 games
 - > 23 wins
 - > 68%

* rugbydatabase.co.nz



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ROB IN A RUSH



ROB RUSH IS THE LATEST IN NEW ZEALAND'S LONG LINE OF TALENTED BLINDSIDE FLANKERS. AHEAD OF HIS DEBUT SEASON FOR THE BLUES RUSH TALKED TO **JIM KAYES** ABOUT HIS GOALS AND WHO HE SEES AS THE BEST IN HIS POSITION.

Rob Rush wasn't even in the Blues when he started making his mark.

A few years ago, when he was brought in as part of a wider training group to see how life as a professional operates, Rush won the gruelling preseason run through the quagmire of mud at Auckland's Devonport Naval Base.

"He wins everything," assistant coach Tom Coventry says of the 22-year-old Northland loose forward whose father, Eric, was an All Black and a sevens legend.

He won then and he was winning again this preseason whether it was in the mud or racing up hills.

"He pushes himself hard and is a great athlete with a good work ethic. He had his best season yet with Northland last year and it was good to see him transferring his work ethic and athleticism onto the field."

Coventry, himself a quality loose forward from Waikato's magnificent era of the late 1980s and early 1990s, is a big fan of Rush who he says is "determined to impress and always wants to get better".

For his part, Rush has a simple goal at the Blues. He wants the other loose forwards to feel his breath on their necks.

"I want to train well and to push the other boys. I want them to feel uncomfortable so that we keep an edge on."

It's a good goal for a first year Super Rugby player though his surname will ensure there is plenty of attention on Rush whenever he takes the field.

And at 193cm tall - 6ft 4 - and 110kgs he is an ideal size for a blindside flanker and there are murmurings within rugby circles that Rush has what it takes to push for All Blacks honours.

Rush accepts there are opportunities open at No6 in the All Blacks as eight players have been used in the 69 tests since the great Jerome Kaino retired from the international game after the 2017 British and Irish Lions series.

Liam Squire and Vaea Fifita took over initially, playing six and four tests later that year and Squire dominated in 2018 when he played eight of the 14 tests with Shannon Frizell starting in four.

But Squire quit in 2019 with Frizell, Ardie Savea and Scott Barrett used in that World Cup year before Frizell

started in four of the six tests in the covid affected 2020 season.

Injuries and off field issues haven't helped Frizell in the past two years with Akira Ioane the preferred No6 in 2021 when he started nine of the 15 tests, while Frizell, Barrett and Ioane shared the load last year.

Frizell is heading to Japan after the World Cup and Barrett is really a lock who can play six, but with Sam Whitelock and Brodie Retallick expected to retire or head off shore after the World Cup, he will be used primarily at lock.

Buried in the numbers of who has started at blindside in recent years is a name Rush thinks is the best option now he has recovered from a dislocated shoulder suffered last year.



ETHAN BLACKADDER
IS THE MAN. HE IS AN OLD SCHOOL PLAYER AND I RECKON BLINDSIDE IS AN OLD SCHOOL POSITION.'

BLUES

Hookers: Kurt Eklund, Soane Vikiene, Ricky Riccitelli.

Props: Alex Hodgman, James Lay, Ofa Tu'ungafasi, Marcel Renata, Nepo Laulala, Josh Fusitu'a*.

Locks: James Tucker, Sam Darry, Patrick Tuipulotu.

Loose forwards: Cameron Suafoa, Taine Plumtree, Tom Robinson, Akira Ioane, Dalton Papalii, Anton Segner, Hoskins Sotutu, Adrian Choat, Rob Rush*.

Halfbacks: Finlay Christie, Sam Nock, Taufu Funaki.

First-five-eighths: Beauden Barrett, Harry Plummer.

Midfield: Roger Tuivasa-Sheck, Tanielu Tele'a, Rieko Ioane, Corey Evans, Bryce Heem.

Outside backs: Mark Telea, Caleb Clarke, AJ Lam, Jacob Ratumaitavuki-Kneepkens, Caleb Tangitau*, Stephen Perofeta, Zarn Sullivan.

Key Gains: Patrick Tuipulotu (Japan), James Lay (injury).

On the move: Karl Tu'inukuafe (France), Josh Goodhue (Japan), Tamati Tua (Brumbies), Luke Romano (Retired).

*Denotes players on a full Super Rugby Pacific contract for the first time.

2023 DRAW



BLUES

1 25.02 7.05PM	2 05.03 4.00PM	3 11.03 7.05PM	4 18.03 7.05PM	5 26.03 3.35PM
6 01.04 7.05PM	7 08.04 9.45PM	8 BYE ROUND 08	9 22.04 7.05PM	10 29.04 2.05PM
11 06.05 7.05PM	12 13.05 7.05PM	13 19.05 9.35PM	14 27.05 7.05PM	15 02.06 7.05PM

*ALL BLUES GAMES LISTED IN NZT

SUPER ROUND
(MELBOURNE)

HOME
 AWAY





The Blues' Akira Ioane's 15 starts for the All Blacks have all been at blindside.

"Ethan Blackadder is the man," Rush reckons. "He is an old school player and I reckon blindside is an old school position. That fella eats it up."

What he means is that a good No6 is a workhorse, toiling away in the tight but also needed out wide and in a support role.

The All Blacks have had some of the best there have been with Ian Kirkpatrick, AJ Whetton, Michael Jones, Jerry Collins and Kaino all world class.

Rush sees himself as a bit of an old

school player too.

"I enjoy things not many others enjoy. I would rather make 100 tackles than score 10 tries. I really enjoy the contact - making tackles and carrying the ball."

It's music to Coventry's ears who says Rush ticks plenty of boxes with his work rate, accuracy, physicality, lineout prowess and defence.

"The NPC does turn out good players and Robbie is one of the best to come from our region in recent years."

Rush comes from a storied family as

Eric is one of the greatest sevens players New Zealand has produced and his brother, Brady, who is a year older and following in Eric's sevens footsteps.

Rob Rush doesn't see himself as a sevens player but does credit his father, and his mother Raina, for instilling in him a work ethic Sir Gordon Tietjens would be proud of.

"When Dad was away overseas (playing sevens) it was Mum who was left looking after five kids. She kept us grounded and busy."

There was a time when Rush tested



Rob Rush's strong season with Northland last year earned him a Blues contract.

the 'stay busy' ethos as he told his father he wasn't interested in playing rugby any more and would, instead, just like to play video games.

"Dad said, 'sure', and then he gave me a list of chores I had to do around the house. It was ok that I wasn't playing rugby but I wasn't going to do nothing. So I kept playing rugby!"

It paid off as he has a debut contract with the Blues but he does face some stiff competition from Ioane in particular, and also northland teammate Tom Robinson, to get a start

at blindside.

Coventry isn't worried. With the All Blacks on graduated return to play and the Blues keen to hit the ground running with those primed from the preseason, there will be early opportunities for Rush.

He is also keen to use him as a No8.

As for the All Blacks, Coventry thinks that is a strong chance for Rush in the future.

"A good loose forward has a good work rate and can demonstrate his skills often. You want them to carry

the ball hard and then finish off the try on the edge because they've stayed involved. I call it double actions and that's something that suits Robbie. He has that work ethic to stay involved."

And while Coventry agrees with Rush that Blackadder is a terrific example of that job description, he's not the only one that fits that bill.

"If you put Robbie on the field with Ethan Blackadder he would be right up there. He would hold his own. They are built in the same factory, those two."

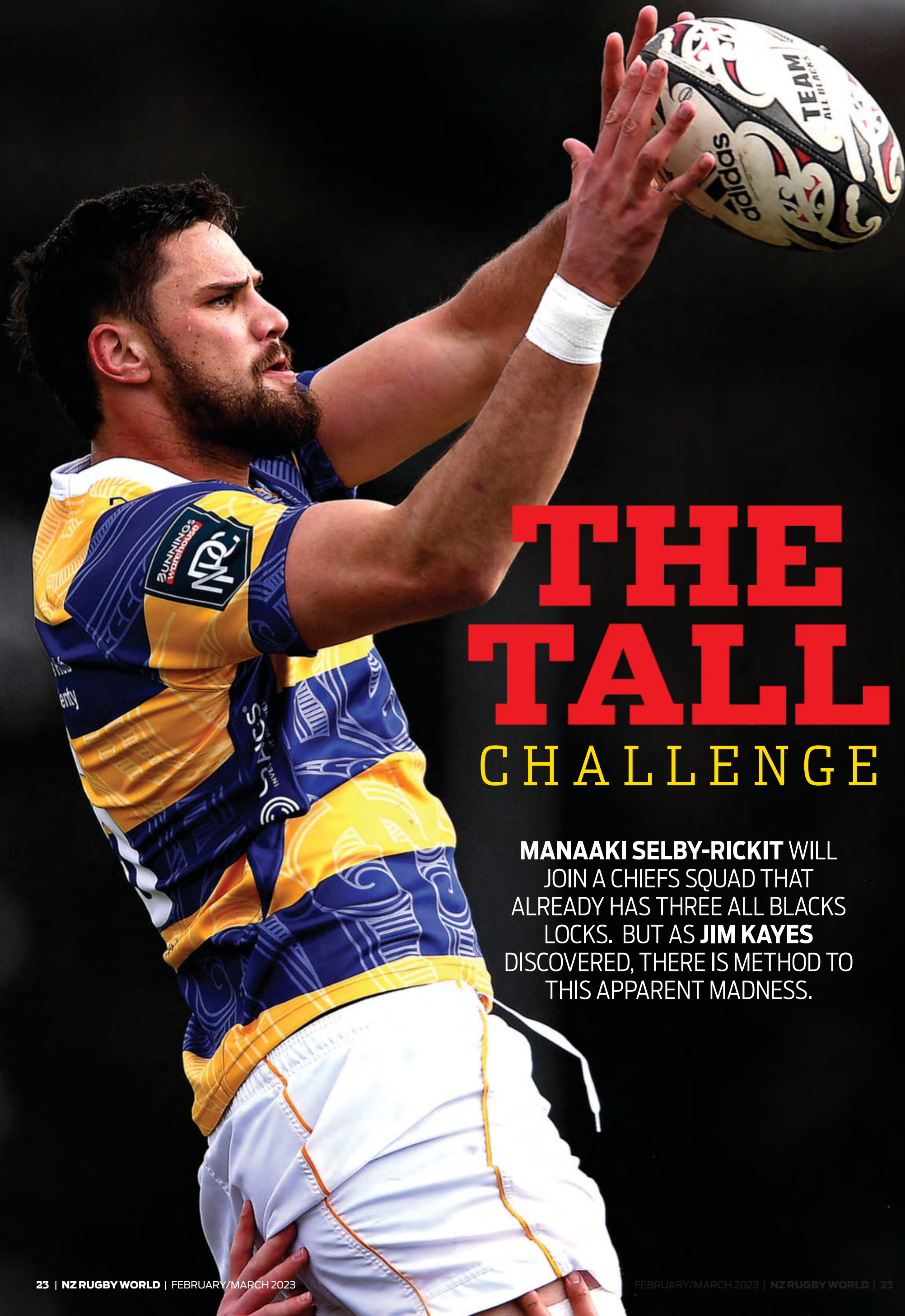


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THE TALL CHALLENGE

MANAAKI SELBY-RICKIT WILL JOIN A CHIEFS SQUAD THAT ALREADY HAS THREE ALL BLACKS LOCKS. BUT AS **JIM KAYES** DISCOVERED, THERE IS METHOD TO THIS APPARENT MADNESS.

Few

signings have raised eyebrows quite like Manaaki Selby-Rickit putting pen to paper with the Chiefs.

Why, people asked on social and mainstream media, would an established Highlanders lock move north to a franchise that can start All Blacks Brodie Retallick and Tupou Vaa'i, with Josh Lord in reserve. Add to that the highly talented Laghlan McWhannell and Naitoa Ah Kuoi and there seems little chance Selby-Rickit will get much playing time.

It's madness, surely.
Not really.

On a personal level Selby-Rickit has moved north because his partner, Renne Brown, is pregnant with their first child, a daughter who is due in March. Brown is from Auckland, they were living in Tauranga (but have since moved to Hamilton) and Dunedin is too far to commute.

"I love the Highlanders," Selby-Rickit says. "They took care of me in the hardest time of my life (he was convicted of assault in 2019) and I appreciate everything they have done."

"But when we found out Renne is pregnant I had to move and I have always been a big fan of the Chiefs and with my Dad playing for Waikato back in the day I was keen to get up here and get amongst it."



At 2.06m **Dominic Bird** is the tallest All Black while **Brodie Retallick** at 2.04m is the tallest of the current crop.

GALLAGHER CHIEFS

Hookers: Samisoni Taukei'aho, Bradley Slater, Tyrone Thompson

Props: Aidan Ross, Atunaisa Moli, Angus Ta'avao, Ollie Norris, George Dyer*, Jared Proffit*.

Locks: Tupou Vaa'i, Brodie Retallick, Laghlan McWhannell, Naitoa Ah Kuoi, Josh Lord, Manaaki Selby-Rickit

Loose forwards: Sam Cane, Luke Jacobson, Simon Parker, Pita Gus Sowakula, Kaylum Boshier, Samipeni Finau.

Halfbacks: Brad Weber, Xavier Roe, Cortez Ratima

First five-eighths: Bryn Gatland, Damian McKenzie, Josh Ioane.

Midfielders: Alex Nankivell, Quinn Tupaea, Anton Lienert-Brown, Rameka Poihipi, Gideon Wrampling, Ngatungane Punivai.

Outside backs: Emoni Narawa, Etene Nanai-Seturo, Shaun Stevenson, Rivez Reihana, Peniasi Malimali*.

Key Gains: Damian McKenzie (Japan); Manaaki Selby-Rickit (Highlanders), Ngatungane Punivai (Highlanders).

On the move: Kaleb Trask (Japan), Jonah Lowe (Highlanders), Chase Tiatia (Western Force).

*Denotes players on a full Super Rugby Pacific contract for the first time.

2023 DRAW



CHIEFS

1	24.02 7.05PM	2	04.03 7.05PM	3	10.03 7.05PM	4	18.03 4.35PM	5	24.03 9.35PM
6	01.04 7.05PM	7	BYE ROUND 07	8	15.04 7.05PM	9	21.04 7.05PM	10	29.04 7.05PM
11	05.05 7.05PM	12	12.05 7.05PM	13	20.05 7.05PM	14	27.05 9.45PM	15	04.06 12:00AM

*ALL CHIEFS GAMES LISTED IN NZT

SUPER ROUND
(MELBOURNE)

HOME
 AWAY

SUPER RUGBY
PACIFIC



At a rugby level, Selby-Rickit realises the challenge of joining a franchise replete with quality - and some of them world class - locks, but it's a challenge he is relishing.

"There is a lot more competition here. I worked hard to get to where I was with the Highlanders and it's back to square one now but I'm happy to do that considering I have a family on the way."

Chiefs Coach Clayton McMillan is confident that challenge will be good not just for Selby-Rickit, but for the Chiefs established locks too. And McMillan is looking to future proof the Chiefs.

"We are constantly looking at our roster and trying to predict what it might look like in two or three years' time.

"We anticipate this will be Brodie's last season with us; he is likely to head overseas. And we have a couple of All Blacks in Tupou Vaa'i, Brodie and Josh Lord who will need to be managed through the Super Rugby season.

"Laghlán, when he is out on the field, is an absolute superstar but he's had an unfortunate run of injuries over the three years.

"I think he's managed to get on the field three or four times over that period.

"So right now, if you look at our roster, our locking stocks look really strong - and they are - but we need to be mindful of the next 12 to 24 months.

"Picking up a two metre lock with experience and who will fit into the type of game we want to play is not easy so when Manaaki came onto the market, it was a no brainer really.

"He has that experience and he's really grown into his body. He was a bit stringy in his first few years of Super Rugby but he is starting to add some good weight onto his frame and that's brought a much better physicality to his performances in the last 12 months."

Selby-Rickit is two metres tall (six foot seven inches in the old measure) and he gets his height from his father, Hud, who played two tests against Scotland in 1981 and at 2.03m was the tallest All Black till the 2.04m tall Chris Tregaskis came along in 1991. Rickit wasn't surpassed in a test match till Mark Cooksley (2.05m) debuted against the World XV in April 1992.

Dominic Bird (2.06m) is the tallest All Black and Retallick the biggest of the current crop at 2.04m



A LOT OF THESE TWO METRE-PETERS LOOK LIKE A GALLOPING GIRAFFE THEN THE MUSCLES START TO CATCH UP WITH THE GROWTH OF THEIR BODIES.'

"A lot of these guys who are two metre-Peters look like a galloping giraffe then the muscles start to catch up with the growth of their bodies," McMillan says. "Manaaki is a big man but I have definitely seen a change in his physical profile, particularly over the last 12 months, and that's brought a greater physicality to his game.

"If he wants to progress to the next level that's something he needs to display more consistently."

The move to the Chiefs is also something of a spiritual homecoming for Selby-Rickit. Though he was born and bred in Ōtaki, north of Wellington, his father played 59 games for Waikato (and played for Queensland against the All Blacks in 1974).

"Manaaki is a great young man and we feel at the Chiefs, where we have a strong cultural flavour to our organisation, that he will be a really good fit," McMillan says.



“You can go anywhere and play rugby but you can’t go everywhere and feel like you belong.

“Manaaki has been brought up in Te Ao Māori, he’s been brought up in a Māori world, he went to a total immersion Māori school, he’s fluent in the language and he’s got strong family ties to the region, so in a lot of ways it is a homecoming of sorts for him.”

But the warm fuzzies will end at the first training he has with Retallick who

is famous for hurting his team mates with his no-holds-barred attitude.

“You have to earn his respect,” McMillan says. “Brodie has probably injured more people at training than we’ve received in games and Manaaki is just another one who is going to have to watch out.

“He is a great role model for big men who know how to work hard, nail their core roles and be right in the thick of the action. There is no better

example.”

Selby-Rickit is no stranger to intense competition having grown up as the youngest of five siblings, with two sisters - Te Paea and Te Huinga Reo - who played for the Silver Ferns.

“It was always competitive and because I was the youngest I wasn’t the best at anything because I was younger and smaller, but I was always competing. Everything was a competition and it still is, to be honest.

**BRODIE IS A GREAT
ROLE MODEL FOR
BIG MEN WHO KNOW HOW
TO WORK HARD, NAIL THEIR
CORE ROLES AND BE RIGHT IN
THE THICK OF THE ACTION.'**



"I just want to compete with these locks here (at the Chiefs), see where I stand and just keep pushing for the All Blacks."

McMillan is confident the 26-year-old has what it takes to play test rugby though there is plenty of competition not just at the Chiefs, with the likes of All Blacks Scott Barrett and Patrick Tuipulotu still young internationally.

"He's certainly got the ability," McMillan says. "You look at the established All Blacks set up and there is going to be some movement there with the more experienced guys at the back end of their careers and then there will be a new wave of talent."

"For anyone aspiring to be at the All Black level, they have to be a consistent performer. Manaaki, in terms of his

lineout ability, his aerial ability, he is right up there with the best, his scrummaging is improving with the added size and strength, and so is the physicality he is bring to the other parts of the game - the collisions, the tackles, the carries and the cleans.

"There is improvement but there is still a massive upside and at 26 he has time on his side."

Independent review of the constitution, governance structure and processes of the **New Zealand Rugby Union Inc.**

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nzhugby.co.nz/governance-review

Public submissions close
28th February 2023





THE BIG MAC

PETER LAKAI

PETER LAKAI IS ON THE FAST TRACK TO THE ALL BLACKS, A PATH THAT WAS INITIALLY FUELLED BY A POPULAR BURGER. HE CHATTED WITH **JASON PINE** ABOUT HIS RAPID RISE.

Since the advent of professional rugby, New Zealand has produced a string of exceptional number eights; rangy ball-runners, ferocious tacklers, intelligent line-runners and impressive leaders. The mantle was passed from Zinzan Brooke to Taine Randell, then Rodney So'oialo and onto Kieran Read and Ardie Savea. Now, comparisons are being made between Savea and the latest prospect to roll off New Zealand's seemingly limitless production line. Peter Lakai has arrived.

The teenaged loose forward made an immediate impact in his debut season with Wellington, standing out in the Lions side that brought the Ranfurly Shield and NPC title to the capital. At the New Zealand Rugby awards, he was named Age Grade Player of the Year and was a finalist in the Duane Monkley Medal for best NPC player, despite the fact he won't turn 20 until the new Super Rugby season is underway.

It's hard to pinpoint what impressed most about Lakai's first NPC season. He made more carries than anyone, regularly picking the ball up from the back of a scrum or ruck and charging across the advantage line to set up another attack. But he was also third in the NPC's overall tackle count, stopping opposition players in their tracks with bone-crunching intensity.

"I guess I'm alright at the physical side of the game, so I try to use that to my advantage and learn to love it," says the softly-spoken Lakai.

“I prepare during the week and once I get the micro-details out of the way and learn my lineouts and things like that, I can just go out there and bang bodies. I don’t really need too much geeing up. It’s just something I do – make tackles and run hard.”

Auckland-born but Wellington-raised, Lakai first played rugby for the Stokes Valley club at the age of five, his grandfather taking him to Delaney Park on frosty winter mornings. One of his aunties promised a Big Mac for every try he scored, which soon started costing her more than she probably imagined. Lakai finished very few games without a Macca’s run afterwards.

Once he reached Avalon Intermediate, rugby became more serious with Lakai making Wellington and Hutt Valley rep sides as a self-described “stubby little kid

playing in the front row”. At secondary school he moved into the loose forwards and has never looked back.

Lakai attended Saint Patrick’s College (Silverstream), a school with Asafo Aumua, Earle Kirton and Joe Karam among its All Blacks alumni. He was a talented junior volleyball player and a regionally ranked shot putter, but rugby took over when he made the First XV during Year 11. He co-captained the side in his final year, alongside fellow rising Hurricanes star Riley Higgins.

“Some of my best mates were in that team,” Lakai says. “They’re guys I saw every day, was in class with, training with after school and playing alongside on Saturday. They’re really fond memories. They were a good bunch of boys who I stay in contact with even now.”



Peter Lakai's dominant NPC season with Wellington earned him elevation to the Hurricanes.

HURRICANES

Hookers: Asafo Aumua, Dane Coles, Jacob Devery*.

Props: Tevita Mafileo, Owen Franks, Xavier Numia, Tyrel Lomax, Pasilio Tosi, Pouri Rakete-Stones.

Locks: James Blackwell, Dom Bird, Isaia Walker-Leawere, Justin Sangster.

Loose forwards: Brayden Iose, Du’Plessis Kirifi, Reed Prinsep, Ardie Savea, Tyler Laubscher, Devan Flanders, Caleb Delany, TK Howden, Peter Lakai*.

Halfbacks: Jamie Booth, TJ Perenara, Cam Roigard

First-five-eighths: Aidan Morgan, Ruben Love, Brett Cameron.

Midfield: Riley Higgins*, Billy Proctor, Peter Umaga-Jensen, Bailyn Sullivan.

Outside backs: Julian Savea, Jordie Barrett, Salesi Rayasi, Josh Moorby, Kini Naholo, Daniel Sinkinson*.

Key Gains: Kini Naholo (Crusaders), Brett Cameron (Japan).

On the move: Scott Scafton (Italy), Jackson Garden-Bachop (Japan), Pepesana Patafilo (Crusaders), Wes Goosen (Scotland).

**Denotes players on a full Super Rugby Pacific contract for the first time.*

2023 DRAW



HURRICANES

1 25.02 9.45PM	2 03.03 10.10PM	3 11.03 7.05PM	4 17.03 7.05PM	5 25.03 7.05PM
6 02.04 3.35PM	7 08.04 7.05PM	8 15.04 7.05PM	9 BYE ROUND 09	10 28.04 7.05PM
11 06.05 2.05PM	12 13.05 4.35PM	13 20.05 7.05PM	14 27.05 7.05PM	15 03.06 7.05PM

*ALL HURRICANES GAMES LISTED IN NZT

SUPER ROUND
(MELBOURNE)

HOME
 AWAY

**SUPER RUGBY
PACIFIC**

EVERY KID IN NEW ZEALAND DREAMS OF BEING AN ALL BLACK AND I'M NO DIFFERENT. IT'S A DREAM, BUT I'LL JUST TAKE IT AS IT COMES AND SEE HOW FAR WE GET.'

The school's Director of Rugby is Tim Mannix, himself a former elite player. He says while Lakai was clearly talented, he wasn't pushed. In fact, he wasn't selected for any New Zealand age-group sides while he was at St. Pat's.

"Peter wasn't treated any differently," says Mannix. "We didn't set him up to be a professional, but we gave him a great environment to play rugby, explore the game and test his skills against good schools. He's shown you don't have to be in a really full-on programme to make the next steps."

The next steps were club rugby with Petone and the Hurricanes under-20 side in 2021, from which he was selected for the New Zealand under-20's, then the Wellington squad for the 2022 NPC.

"The physicality, skill level and speed of the game went up another level," he says. "You're playing against world-class players. After the first couple of rounds, I started getting into my groove. The coaches put in the right system and I could just go out there and play my game without worrying too much."

"I knew I could hold my own or even do well at NPC level. I was just waiting for the opportunity and when it came, I took it with both hands and ran with it.



There were a few games when I surprised myself."

Lakai was an instant sensation as Wellington enjoyed an incredible season, winning 10 of their 12 NPC games and lifting the trophy for the first time since 2000. Along the way, they claimed the Ranfurly Shield, Lakai's barnstorming run setting up TJ Perenara for the winning try in their 19-12 victory over holders Hawke's Bay in Napier.

Lakai's inevitable elevation to the Hurricanes was confirmed when he signed a three-year contract ahead of the Lions' semi-final mauling of Auckland. He'll join several members of the NPC-winning side, as well as the man to whom he's been regularly compared, Ardie Savea.

"I try not to read too much into it. We might play in a similar way, but I think we have a lot of differences. It's humbling to hear, but I just want to be



Peter Lakai.”

Savea himself has no doubt Lakai has what it takes to be successful in Super Rugby and beyond. “He’s just a quiet, humble young man who goes about his work,” says Savea.

“The thing I worry about is all the media hype; that they put pressure on this young fella and if he has bad games, some people can tear him down. It’s just about enjoying himself, putting in the work and not believing

the outside noise.”

But naturally there will be excitement and a certain degree of expectation, driven by Lakai’s eye-catching deeds at provincial level. Not every teenager can do what he does.

“Trying to stay grounded is a big thing for me,” he says. “My friends and family help a lot with that. I’ve got a lot of aunties, uncles and cousins who look out for me and I look out for them, too.”

“It’s a bit hard to explain, but they

don’t really chat too much about footy with me and I try to stay away from footy when I can. It takes up a lot of my time, but when I do have time on the side, I try to get away and hang out with mates.”

The next time he pulls on a rugby jersey, it’ll be for the Hurricanes as Lakai goes from young fan in the stands to the green grass of Sky Stadium as one of the franchise’s exciting new recruits.



Peter Lakai is regularly compared to Hurricanes and All Blacks No8 **Ardie Savea**.

AT FIVE, ONE OF HIS AUNTIES PROMISED A BIG MAC FOR EVERY TRY HE SCORED, WHICH SOON STARTED COSTING HER MORE THAN SHE PROBABLY IMAGINED.'

"I had photos taken with younger supporters after some Lions games and it made me reminisce back to when I was in their shoes and asking for autographs. I've got photos of me with Bus (Julian Savea) from around 2012. He and Ardie were the ones I used to love watching run over guys at the Cake Tin. Hopefully I can inspire the next generation."

And having quickly made every transition from college to club, NPC and now Super Rugby, is the final step to the top of New Zealand's rugby pyramid something Lakai aspires to?

"Every kid in New Zealand dreams of being an All Black and I'm no different. It's a dream, but I'll just take it as it comes and see how far we get."



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T&C'S APPLY



BILLY THE CAPTAIN



AS THEY PREPARE FOR A CHANGING OF THE GUARD THE HIGHLANDERS HAVE A NEW SKIPPER IN FLANKER BILLY HARMON. HE TALKED TO **NICK BEWLEY**.



ou often hear of captaincy being a burden. The added responsibility can weigh

heavily on a player in any sport.

It's not as simple as being the person to lead a team onto a field and choosing which direction they want to go in the first half. There's the extra meetings, tactical decisions, conversations with the referee, all while ensuring that the player is doing his or her core role. Then there's the off field obligations – extra fulfilments to undertake with the media, with sponsors, with the fans. Sometimes a captain can be thrust into the role given they know the fabric of the place. They've been around a while, and are already considered a senior voice.

Billy Harmon didn't go searching for captaincy, but now it's found him – he's relishing the responsibility.

The versatile loose forward entered his seventh season with Canterbury last year after a frustrating Super Rugby campaign. A shoulder injury sustained while training during the 2021 NPC season kept him sidelined at the Highlanders until April. Harmon watched on as the franchise suffered its worst start to a season in their history – six straight defeats.

He returned to help the Highlanders squeak into the Super Rugby Pacific playoffs in eighth out of 12 teams, having won just the four matches from 14. They were handsomely beaten by the Blues in the quarter finals – a match Harmon barely remembers, perhaps for the best, after being on the wrong end of a nasty head collision in the second half.

Two matches for the Māori All Blacks against Ireland followed before a new era was about to begin in Christchurch.

Marty Bourke had been promoted from assistant to Canterbury head coach, and his first role after taking over from Reuben Thorne and Mark Brown was finding a new captain. Reed Prinsep – who captained the team in 2021 – tore his hamstring playing for the Māori All Blacks, and was in a race to be fit for the back end of the campaign.

There was no shortage of candidates with ex-internationals and experienced faces strongly featuring in Canterbury's squad but it was Harmon who got the nod. Harmon took to the role with aplomb, and guided the proud province to a home NPC final where they fell at the last hurdle to a determined Wellington side.

"That was a huge honour [being named captain] and I actually quite enjoyed it," Harmon says.

"I wasn't too sure how I'd go to be fair, but I was pretty lucky that everyone in that team environment really stepped up and helped me lead so it made my job so much easier.

Everyone was nailing their roles and playing really well. Marty did an awesome job too of setting up our team

and our environment. His first year as head coach and he nailed it."

Little did Harmon know another first year head coach would soon come calling with a similar offer.

A new era was brewing further south at the Highlanders too – one Harmon will play a pivotal role in. Clarke Dermody was mulling over one of his biggest decisions since being appointed head coach. The former Southland and Highlanders prop sensed a changing of the guard was coming as is often the case in a World Cup year. This season could be the last for a wave of veteran Highlanders including one of the best to don the jersey in Aaron Smith.

"I had a good discussion with both Aaron [Smith] and James [Lentjes] who ended up as co-captains last year, before the decision was made to



Billy Harmon got his first taste of captaincy when he led Canterbury in last year's NPC.

HIGHLANDERS

Hookers: Rhys Marshall, Andrew Makalio, Leni Apisai.

Props: Ayden Johnstone, Jeff Thwaites, Ethan de Groot, Jermaine Ainsley, Daniel Lienert-Brown, Saula Ma'u, Luca Inch*.

Locks: Pari-Pari Parkinson, Josh Dickson, Max Hicks, Will Tucker*, Fabian Holland*.

Loose forwards: James Lentjes, Billy Harmon, Hugh Renton, Shannon Frizell, Marino Mikaele-Tu'u, Sean Withy, Nikora Broughton*.

Halfbacks: Aaron Smith, Folau Fakatava, James Arscott*.

First-five-eighths: Marty Banks, Mitchell Hunt, Cameron Millar.

Midfield: Fetuli Paea, Thomas Umaga-Jensen, Scott Gregory, Josh Timu

Outside backs: Connor Garden-Bachop, Moses Dawai, Vilimoni Koroi, Jona Nareki, Jonah Lowe, Sam Gilbert.

Key Gains: Jonah Lowe (Chiefs).

On the move: Liam Coltman (France), Maanaki Selby-Rickit (Chiefs), Kayne Hammington (Japan), Patelesio Tomkinson (Wales), Ngatungane Punivai (Chiefs).

**Denotes players on a full DHL Super Rugby Pacific contract for the first time.*

2023 DRAW



HIGHLANDERS

1 25.02 7.05PM	2 03.03 8.00PM	3 10.03 7.05PM	4 19.03 3.35PM	5 25.03 4.35PM
6 31.03 7.05PM	7 08.04 7.05PM	8 BYE ROUND 08	9 22.04 9.45PM	10 28.04 9.35PM
11 05.05 7.05PM	12 14.05 4.35PM	13 20.05 4.35PM	14 26.05 7.05PM	15 02.06 7.05PM

*ALL HIGHLANDERS GAMES LISTED IN NZT

SUPER ROUND
(MELBOURNE)

HOME
 AWAY



Billy Harmon replaces Aaron Smith as Highlanders captain but will have the veteran halfback around for another year to lean on and learn from.





**ONE OF
THE MOST
IMPORTANT THINGS
TOO, AS A LEADER,
IS THAT YOU'RE
PERFORMING WELL.
IT'S A LOT EASIER TO
INSTRUCT PEOPLE
OR LEAD IF YOU'RE
NAILING YOUR ROLE.'**

approach Billy." Dermody said.

"They were both in agreeance that to help set the team up the best we could, if there was going to be a change in leadership, it's probably best to do it while they are around so that whoever is the new captain had supportive guys that had been there and done that and had experiences that the new skipper could lean on."

Smith had sounded out Harmon prior to the 2022 season to help him in the games and weeks he'd have to sit out with All Blacks commitments, but that didn't materialise due to his shoulder injury.

At that point Harmon admits he wasn't sure if that added responsibility was right for him but when Dermody called midway through his campaign with Canterbury, he felt assured he was ready.

"My mindset then was that I'm happy to help if that's what the team needs. Fast forward to when Clarke asked me [to be captain] I had a different mindset and it was a role that I was more keen on. I felt like I had a lot to offer in that way. I was a bit more excited about the task rather than being like 'if that's what you guys need' sort of thing."

Dermody's been around professional rugby as a player and now a coach since the turn of the millennium.

He's seen coaches and captains come and go, such is the nature of elite sport. It was Harmon's professionalism and decision making on the field, and connections off it that gave him faith he was the right man for the job.

It's the connections – and what the franchise describes as the "1-39 mantra" – that's served the Highlanders well. Dermody returned to Southland from a playing stint overseas in 2013 when the Highlanders recruited several All Blacks in pursuit of a maiden Super Rugby title. Big names like Brad Thorn, Andrew Hore and Ma'a Nonu arrived as the franchise looked to become contenders. History tells us the opposite occurred – as laid bare in Sky Sport's 1-39 Highlanders documentary. The power balance became skewed, the dressing room was labelled by some as poison and it all came crashing down.

It wasn't until a young Nasi Manu – now back at Highlanders HQ in a mentoring capacity – confronted then coach Jamie Joseph and told him how the players actually felt that a turning point was reached. Two seasons later the Highlanders had their first piece of silverware. It remains their only trophy in the franchise's history.

“You want any player to be able to ‘challenge up’ but obviously the captain is the focal point of the team,” Dermody said.

“Hopefully the captain has a very good relationship with the youngest guy all the way to the top so that they’ve got a good feeling about how the team’s going. And then that information can come through to the coach rather than wait for a review at the end of the year. Quite often you get really good feedback, but it’s too late and then you’ve got six months to think

about it and try and affect change then. That working relationship is going to be really important.”

Harmon says the biggest thing he’s learned from being captain is being confident in who you are.

“You take things from seeing how others operate of course, but you don’t need to be anyone else,” Harmon said.

“You’re the captain because of whatever they [the coaches] see in you so if you’re trying to do something else then it’s going away from why they’ve chosen you.

“One of the most important things too, as a leader, is that you’re performing well. When you’re doing your job, it’s a lot easier to instruct people or lead if you’re nailing your role. When you’re not and you’re trying to say all these things it’s a bit tougher. So that’s my mindset to show up ready to perform, and everything else will flow from that.”



Billy Harmon enjoyed a stellar year in 2022 including two games for NZ Māori against Ireland.



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Photo: Moana Pasifika

A MIRACLE MAN

MIRACLE FAI'ILAGI IS THE FIRST RAW RECRUIT FROM SAMOA FOR MOANA PASIFIKA BUT HE AND THE CLUB ARE CONFIDENT HE CAN DELIVER SOMETHING SPECIAL. IN HIS NZRW DEBUT, **THOMAS AIREY** HAS THIS REMARKABLE STORY.

Miracle Fai'ilagi is the first player brought directly from Samoa into Super Rugby by Moana Pasifika.

The pace and intensity of play might be higher, but new Moana Pasifika recruit Miracle Fai'ilagi says rugby with the Auckland-based club feels a lot like it did at home in Samoa.

Faith is ubiquitous, so lotu (prayer) and pese (song) are inherent parts of sport in the islands. They're integral parts of life at Moana Pasifika too, and for Fai'ilagi it helped him feel part of the team and at home, even after leaving his family for the first time.

"It was pretty hard to accept that, leaving them behind," said the 23-year-old loose forward from Vailele and Uafato, the first Super Rugby player picked directly from Samoa.



Photo: Moana Pasifika

“But you know, you’ve got to do this for them. I’m doing this for them, so I have to be strong.”

Tautua, service to a cause or family, is a key part of the Samoan way.

Growing up, Fai’ilagi watched his

uncle and idol, Manu Samoa lock Iosefa ‘Joe’ Tekori financially support his family during 15 years of rugby in France.

When Tekori retired in June and Fai’ilagi signed his Super Rugby Pacific

contract mere months later, he knew it was his turn to walk in those shoes – literally.

“He was always asking for shoes and all that stuff,” Tekori laughed of his nephew that shares his size 15 feet.



A promotional poster for the Super Rugby Pacific 2023 squad. On the left is a large portrait of a player, Miracle Fai'ilagi, wearing a blue jersey with a 'DYNASTY' logo. The background is a light beige with a subtle pattern. The top left features the 'SUPER RUGBY PACIFIC' logo. The top center has the 'MOANA PASIFIKA' logo, which is a stylized blue and orange circular emblem. To the right of the Moana Pasifika logo is the text 'SUPER RUGBY PACIFIC' in blue and 'SQUAD 2023' in large orange letters. The squad is listed in two columns, with player names under category headers. A legend at the bottom right explains the asterisk symbol used for newly contracted players.

PROPS

ABRAHAM POLE *

CHRIS APOUA

EZEKIEL LINDENMUTH

ISI TU'UNGAFASI

JOE 'APIKOTOA

SEKOPE KÉPU

TAUKIHA'AMEA KOLOAMATANGI

HOOKERS

LUTERU TOLAI

RAY NIUIA

SAMIUELA MOLI

LOCKS

ALEX MCROBBIE

MAHONRI NGAKURU *

MIKE MCKEE

SAMUEL SLADE

LOOSE FORWARDS

ALAMANDA MOTUGA

JACK LAM

LOTU INISI

MICHAEL CURRY *

MIRACLE FAILAGI *

PENITOA FINAU

SIONE TU'IRULOTU

SOLOMONEIFUNAKI

INSIDE BACKS

CHRISTIAN LEALI'IFANO

D'ANGELO LEUILA *

ERETARA ENARI

JONATHAN TAUMATEINE

LINCOLN MCCLUTCHIE

MANU PAEA

WILLIAM HAVILI

MIDFIELD

DANNY TOALA

FINE INISI

HENRY TAEFU

LEVI AUMUA

OUTSIDE BACKS

ANZELO TUITAVUKI

LOLAGI VISINIA

NERIA FOMA'I

TIMA FAINGA'ANUKU

TIMOCI TAVATAVANAWAI

TOMASI ALOSIO

* NEWLY CONTRACTED
PLAYER IN 2023

2023 DRAW



MOANA PASIFIKA

1 25.02 4.35PM	2 04.03 7.05PM	3 12.03 12.00AM	4 18.03 9.45PM	5 25.03 7.05PM
6 31.03 7.05PM	7 07.04 7.05PM	8 14.04 7.05PM	9 BYE ROUND 09	10 29.04 4.35PM
11 06.05 7.05PM	12 13.05 4.35PM	13 19.05 7.05PM	14 27.05 2.05PM	15 03.06 9.45PM

*ALL MOANA PASIFIKA GAMES LISTED IN NZT

SUPER ROUND
(MELBOURNE)

HOME
 AWAY



The 39-year-old from Vailele and Asau said he could tell Miracle wanted to be like him, but was always shy to ask how.

It's clear he was watching his uncle closely.

"The way he runs, the fitness, the holding the ball, that's exactly the way I started rugby in school back in Samoa."

Tekori came to Auckland after high school, cracking the NPC squad before his international career began and he moved his family to the other side of the world.

There are no regrets there, but Tekori wishes Moana Pasifika was around when he was Fai'ilagi's age. Like his nephew, he could have had the chance to play autumn rugby on Super Rugby wages and play for Manu Samoa without putting a Super Rugby contract in jeopardy.

And the biggest bonus – live in New Zealand around family, just one flight away from home.

"We all are so proud of him, my family back in New Zealand, my family back in Samoa," Tekori said.

"He has the potential to start a new life with rugby."

It was Lakapi Samoa (formerly the Samoa Rugby Union) academy manager Tupuivao Afa Hanipale who made Fai'ilagi the key man in his forward pack for development side Manu Samoa's tour of Fiji in August 2022.

He shone in two defeats to the Fiji Warriors, earning selection for the subsequent World Rugby Pacific Combine and captaining the composite team there.

Moana Pasifika management flew to Fiji for the Combine intending to offer two players preseason training contracts, but were so impressed by Fai'ilagi they signed him to a two-year deal with the core squad.

"Miracle was a clear stand out for us, he caught our eye early with how he handled himself, not just on the field, but off it as well," Moana Pasifika coach Aaron Mauger told stuff.co.nz.

"He's been in the sevens environment, so he knows how to work hard, knows how to push himself and he performed really well on gameday against the Fiji Warriors side.

"We felt he was ready for this opportunity and it's really exciting and now it's visible for young, aspiring players in the islands, that they too can become Super Rugby players and be a part of Moana Pasifika."

MIRACLE WAS A CLEAR STAND OUT FOR US, HE CAUGHT OUR EYE EARLY WITH HOW HE HANDLED HIMSELF, NOT JUST ON THE FIELD, BUT OFF IT AS WELL.'

AARON MAUGER

Tupuivao, also from Vailele, was shocked and ecstatic when he heard the news.

"I'm still buzzing about him, I just can't wait to watch him play," he said.

The two have known each other since June 2020, when Tupuivao first coached the player in an Apia club tournament.

Fai'ilagi was noticeably different. Everyone there was talented, but he had an eagerness to learn that impressed the coach.

Tupuivao was opening a retail sports shop that year, and he hired Fai'ilagi and a few more rising rugby stars to work for him.

With no professional rugby in Samoa outside the Manu Samoa Sevens programme, talented players are forced to figure out how to grow their rugby careers while supporting their families.

As a coach, boss and mentor, Tupuivao hoped to teach his mentees professionalism, how to deal with pressure, responsibility and humility, to serve them in the overseas careers they each dreamed of.

"[Fai'ilagi] was more like a son to me. I'd give him advice, not just about rugby but about life and making the right decisions."

It's hard to argue with the results; another of Tupuivao's 'sons' Theo McFarland debuted for Manu Samoa directly from the same club competitions Fai'ilagi played in and signed for Saracens in 2021, where he is now arguably the best flanker in the English Premiership.

Paul Eti Slater is a regular in the Manu Samoa Sevens squad that won their first tournament since 2016 when they beat the All Blacks Sevens in the final at Cape Town in December.

Fai'ilagi was part of that

programme's stunning turnaround too, playing his first senior international match in Samoa's return to the Series in April 2022, after 762 days away due to Covid-19.

He played at four World Series legs before leaving the squad to focus on Manu Samoa's August tour.

2022 was a truly remarkable year for Fai'ilagi, but someone very special wasn't there to share it with him.

His father, Reverend Vaatausili Fai'ilagi passed away in April 2020.

"It was pretty hard, and I didn't believe it at first," Fai'ilagi said.

Both parents were working in American Samoa and the pandemic meant Fai'ilagi couldn't attend the funeral.

"It was pretty sad, I didn't get to see him for the last time. I'm doing this all for him, and I just hope that he is proud of me."

It was an earlier stint in hospital for his father that saw Fai'ilagi given his christian name.

"My mum was in labour and at that time my dad was in surgery, so he wasn't able to witness that. So it was like a miracle, giving life to my mum and also my dad."

Before Tupuivao, Fai'ilagi's father was the one who pushed him to fulfill his rugby potential. He considers his career to be part of Vaatausili's legacy, a significant motivating factor.

Tupuivao didn't learn of Fai'ilagi's loss until later.

"From there on, our relationship got stronger. I related to him because my dad passed away when I was 11. People along the way helped me to get where I am at the moment, so I'm a true believer of paying it forward.

"I want these guys to do the same when they finish their rugby career."



Joe Tekori's career in Europe is an inspiration for Miracle Fai'ilagi.

WHAT'S

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ONE FOR THE KIDS

NZ Rugby World KIDS magazine

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www.nzrugbyworld.co.nz/kids-magazine



FROM
\$29.99



2023 DRAW

DAY & DATE	HOME TEAM	AWAY TEAM	VENUE	KICK OFF (LOCAL)	KICK OFF (GMT)	NEW ZEALAND (NZDT)	FIJI (FJDT)	AUSTRALIA (AEDT)	BRISBANE (AEST)	PERTH (AWST)
ROUND 1										
FRI 24 FEB	CRUSADERS	CHIEFS	ORANGETHEORY STADIUM, CHRISTCHURCH	19:05	6:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	16:05	14:05
FRI 24 FEB	WARATAHS	BRUMBIES	ALLIANZ STADIUM, SYDNEY	19:35	8:35	21:35	20:35	19:35	18:35	16:35
SAT 25 FEB	MOANA PASIFIKA	FIJIAN DRUA	MT SMART STADIUM, AUCKLAND	16:35	3:35	16:35	15:35	14:35	13:35	11:35
SAT 25 FEB	HIGHLANDERS	BLUES	FORSYTH BARR STADIUM, DUNEDIN	19:05	6:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	16:05	14:05
SAT 25 FEB	REDS	HURRICANES	QUEENSLAND COUNTRY BANK STADIUM, TOWNSVILLE	18:35	8:35	21:35	20:35	19:35	18:35	16:35
SAT 25 FEB	FORCE	REBELS	HBF PARK, PERTH	19:00	11:00	0:00 +1	23:00	22:00	21:00	19:00
ROUND 2										
FRI 3 MAR	CRUSADERS	HIGHLANDERS	AAMI PARK, MELBOURNE	18:00	8:00	20:00	19:00	18:00	18:00	16:00
FRI 3 MAR	REBELS	HURRICANES	AAMI PARK, MELBOURNE	20:10	10:10	22:10	21:10	20:10	20:10	18:10
SAT 4 MAR	MOANA PASIFIKA	CHIEFS	AAMI PARK, MELBOURNE	17:05	7:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
SAT 4 MAR	FIJIAN DRUA	WARATAHS	AAMI PARK, MELBOURNE	19:35	9:35	21:35	20:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
SUN 5 MAR	BLUES	BRUMBIES	AAMI PARK, MELBOURNE	14:00	4:00	16:00	15:00	14:00	13:00	11:00
SUN 5 MAR	FORCE	REDS	AAMI PARK, MELBOURNE	16:30	6:30	18:30	17:30	16:30	15:30	13:30
ROUND 3										
FRI 10 MAR	CHIEFS	HIGHLANDERS	FMG STADIUM WAIKATO, HAMILTON	19:05	6:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	16:05	14:05
FRI 10 MAR	REBELS	WARATAHS	AAMI PARK, MELBOURNE	19:35	8:35	21:35	20:35	19:35	18:35	16:35
SAT 11 MAR	FIJIAN DRUA	CRUSADERS	CHURCHILL PARK, LAUTOKA	15:35	3:35	16:35	15:35	14:35	13:35	11:35
SAT 11 MAR	HURRICANES	BLUES	SKY STADIUM, WELLINGTON	19:05	6:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	16:05	14:05
SAT 11 MAR	BRUMBIES	REDS	GIO STADIUM, CANBERRA	19:35	8:35	21:35	20:35	19:35	18:35	16:35
SAT 11 MAR	FORCE	MOANA PASIFIKA	HBF PARK, PERTH	19:00	11:00	0:00 +1	23:00	22:00	21:00	19:00
ROUND 4										
FRI 17 MAR	HURRICANES	WARATAHS	SKY STADIUM, WELLINGTON	19:05	6:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	16:05	14:05
SAT 18 MAR	CHIEFS	REBELS	FMG STADIUM WAIKATO, HAMILTON	16:35	3:35	16:35	15:35	14:35	13:35	11:35
SAT 18 MAR	BLUES	CRUSADERS	EDEN PARK, AUCKLAND	19:05	6:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	16:05	14:05
SAT 18 MAR	BRUMBIES	MOANA PASIFIKA	GIO STADIUM, CANBERRA	19:35	8:35	21:35	20:35	19:35	18:35	16:35
SUN 19 MAR	HIGHLANDERS	FORCE	RUGBY PARK, INVERCARGILL	15:35	2:35	15:35	14:35	13:35	12:35	10:35
SUN 19 MAR	REDS	FIJIAN DRUA	SUNCORP STADIUM, BRISBANE	15:00	6:00	18:00	17:00	16:00	15:00	13:00
ROUND 5										
FRI 24 MAR	CRUSADERS	BRUMBIES	ORANGETHEORY STADIUM, CHRISTCHURCH	19:05	6:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	16:05	14:05
FRI 24 MAR	WARATAHS	CHIEFS	ALLIANZ STADIUM, SYDNEY	19:35	8:35	21:35	20:35	19:35	18:35	16:35
SAT 25 MAR	HIGHLANDERS	FIJIAN DRUA	FORSYTH BARR STADIUM, DUNEDIN	16:35	3:35	16:35	15:35	14:35	13:35	11:35
SAT 25 MAR	MOANA PASIFIKA	HURRICANES	MT SMART STADIUM, AUCKLAND	19:05	6:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	16:05	14:05
SAT 25 MAR	REBELS	REDS	AAMI PARK, MELBOURNE	19:35	8:35	21:35	20:35	19:35	18:35	16:35
SUN 26 MAR	BLUES	FORCE	EDEN PARK, AUCKLAND	15:35	2:35	15:35	14:35	13:35	12:35	10:35
ROUND 6 <i>Daylight savings concludes Australia & New Zealand</i>										
FRI 31 MAR	MOANA PASIFIKA	HIGHLANDERS	MT SMART STADIUM, AUCKLAND	19:05	6:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	16:05	14:05
FRI 31 MAR	REDS	CRUSADERS	SUNCORP STADIUM, BRISBANE	18:35	8:35	21:35	20:35	19:35	18:35	16:35
SAT 1 APR	FIJIAN DRUA	REBELS	HFC BANK STADIUM, SUVA	15:35	3:35	16:35	15:35	14:35	13:35	11:35
SAT 1 APR	CHIEFS	BLUES	FMG STADIUM WAIKATO, HAMILTON	19:05	6:05	19:05	18:05	17:05	16:05	14:05
SAT 1 APR	BRUMBIES	WARATAHS	GIO STADIUM, CANBERRA	19:35	8:35	21:35	20:35	19:35	18:35	16:35
SUN 2 APR	HURRICANES	FORCE	CENTRAL ENERGY TRUST ARENA , PALMERSTON NORTH	15:35	3:35	15:35	15:35	13:35	13:35	11:35
ROUND 7 <i>Easter Weekend</i>										
FRI 7 APR	CRUSADERS	MOANA PASIFIKA	ORANGETHEORY STADIUM, CHRISTCHURCH	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
FRI 7 APR	REDS	BRUMBIES	SUNCORP STADIUM, BRISBANE	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
SAT 8 APR	HIGHLANDERS	HURRICANES	FORSYTH BARR STADIUM, DUNEDIN	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
SAT 8 APR	REBELS	BLUES	AAMI PARK, MELBOURNE	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35

BYE: CHIEFS, FORCE, WARATAHS, FIJIAN DRUA

Day & Date	Home Team	Away Team	Venue	Kick Off (Local)	Kick Off (GMT)	New Zealand (NZDT)	Fiji (FJDT)	Australia (AEDT)	Brisbane (AEST)	Perth (AWST)
Round 8										
Fri 14 Apr	Moana Pasifika	Reds	Samoa	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Fri 14 Apr	Brumbies	Fijian Drua	GIO Stadium, Canberra	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sat 15 Apr	Hurricanes	Chiefs	Sky Stadium, Wellington	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Sat 15 Apr	Waratahs	Force	Allianz Stadium, Sydney	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Bye: Blues, Crusaders, Highlanders, Rebels										
Round 9 <i>Anzac Weekend</i>										
Fri 21 Apr	Chiefs	Fijian Drua	FMG Stadium Waikato, Hamilton	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Fri 21 Apr	Rebels	Crusaders	AAMI Park, Melbourne	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sat 22 Apr	Blues	Waratahs	Eden Park, Auckland	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Sat 22 Apr	Force	Highlanders	HBF Park, Perth	17:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Bye: Moana Pasifika, Hurricanes, Brumbies, Reds										
Round 10										
Fri 28 Apr	Hurricanes	Brumbies	Sky Stadium, Wellington	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Fri 28 Apr	Waratahs	Highlanders	Allianz Stadium, Sydney	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sat 29 Apr	Fijian Drua	Blues	Churchill Park, Lautoka	14:05	2:05	14:05	14:05	12:05	12:05	10:05
Sat 29 Apr	Moana Pasifika	Rebels	MT Smart Stadium, Auckland	16:35	4:35	16:35	16:35	14:35	14:35	12:35
Sat 29 Apr	Chiefs	Crusaders	FMG Stadium Waikato, Hamilton	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Sat 29 Apr	Reds	Force	Suncorp Stadium, Brisbane	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Round 11										
Fri 5 May	Highlanders	Chiefs	Forsyth Barr Stadium, Dunedin	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Sat 6 May	Fijian Drua	Hurricanes	HFC Bank Stadium, Suva	14:05	2:05	14:05	14:05	12:05	12:05	10:05
Sat 6 May	Crusaders	Force	Orangetheory Stadium, Christchurch	16:35	4:35	16:35	16:35	14:35	14:35	12:35
Sat 6 May	Blues	Moana Pasifika	Eden Park, Auckland	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Sat 6 May	Reds	Waratahs	Queensland Country Bank Stadium, Townsville	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sun 7 May	Rebels	Brumbies	AAMI Park, Melbourne	14:35	4:35	16:35	16:35	14:35	14:35	12:35
Round 12										
Fri 12 May	Chiefs	Reds	TBC	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Fri 12 May	Force	Fijian Drua	HBF Park, Perth	17:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sat 13 May	Hurricanes	Moana Pasifika	Sky Stadium, Wellington	16:35	4:35	16:35	16:35	14:35	14:35	12:35
Sat 13 May	Crusaders	Blues	Orangetheory Stadium, Christchurch	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Sat 13 May	Waratahs	Rebels	Allianz Stadium, Sydney	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sun 14 May	Brumbies	Highlanders	GIO Stadium, Canberra	14:35	4:35	16:35	16:35	14:35	14:35	12:35
Round 13										
Fri 19 May	Moana Pasifika	Crusaders	MT Smart Stadium, Auckland	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Fri 19 May	Reds	Blues	Suncorp Stadium, Brisbane	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sat 20 May	Highlanders	Rebels	Forsyth Barr Stadium, Dunedin	16:35	4:35	16:35	16:35	14:35	14:35	12:35
Sat 20 May	Chiefs	Hurricanes	FMG Stadium Waikato, Hamilton	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Sat 20 May	Waratahs	Fijian Drua	Allianz Stadium, Sydney	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sat 20 May	Force	Brumbies	HBF Park, Perth	20:00	12:00	0:00	0:00	22:00	22:00	20:00
Round 14										
Fri 26 May	Highlanders	Reds	Forsyth Barr Stadium, Dunedin	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Fri 26 May	Rebels	Force	AAMI Park, Melbourne	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sat 27 May	Fijian Drua	Moana Pasifika	Churchill Park, Lautoka	14:05	2:05	14:05	14:05	12:05	12:05	10:05
Sat 27 May	Crusaders	Waratahs	Orangetheory Stadium, Christchurch	16:35	4:35	16:35	16:35	14:35	14:35	12:35
Sat 27 May	Blues	Hurricanes	Eden Park, Auckland	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Sat 27 May	Brumbies	Chiefs	GIO Stadium, Canberra	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Round 15										
Fri 2 Jun	Blues	Highlanders	Eden Park, Auckland	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Fri 2 Jun	Brumbies	Rebels	GIO Stadium, Canberra	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sat 3 Jun	Fijian Drua	Reds	HFC Bank Stadium, Suva	16:35	4:35	16:35	16:35	14:35	14:35	12:35
Sat 3 Jun	Hurricanes	Crusaders	Sky Stadium, Wellington	19:05	7:05	19:05	19:05	17:05	17:05	15:05
Sat 3 Jun	Waratahs	Moana Pasifika	Allianz Stadium, Sydney	19:35	9:35	21:35	21:35	19:35	19:35	17:35
Sat 3 Jun	Force	Chiefs	HBF Park, Perth	20:00	12:00	0:00	0:00	22:00	22:00	20:00

CHAMPIONS

The Black Ferns and Argentina won the women's and men's divisions of the sevens World Series in Hamilton.













NO TRY!

Brady Rush thought he had scored this match winning try in extra time of the All Blacks Sevens final against Argentina but the TMO ruled he lost contact with the ball.

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EIGHT YEARS



AND WAITING



THE WARATAHS WERE THE LAST AUSTRALIAN TEAM TO WIN SUPER RUGBY, BACK IN 2014. JIM TUCKER ASSESSES THE AUSSIE TEAM'S CHANCES IN THIS YEAR'S COMPETITION.

It's not overstating the importance of the ACT Brumbies to say the club has single-handedly rescued the viability of Super Rugby Pacific. Cue relief.

The club's four wins over Kiwi sides during the 2022 season, as well as the tight semi-final loss against the Blues, are what rugby fans are desperate to see.

Only a super-competitive heart can make Super Rugby Pacific tick as strongly as it should because for too long Australia's rugby sides have been easy beats.

After three years with Irish giants Munster, Wallaby great Steve Larkham has returned to the helm as coach of the Brumbies.

A member of that rare club with 10 Test wins over the All Blacks as a player, he is determined to build on the Brumbies' impressive 2022 statement.

"Playing any Kiwi side is always a challenge. On any day, an Australian side can compete well but doing that more consistently is what we are all chasing," Larkham said.

Eight wins in total were clawed against Kiwi opposition in 2022 through the Brumbies (four), NSW Waratahs (two), Western Force (one), Melbourne Rebels (one) and Queensland Reds (0). It remains to be seen if that is a vibrant upward trend, the high-water mark of this decade or an anomaly for Aussie sides.

More starkly, that is still just eight wins from 25 trans-Tasman match-ups, including six occasions where whopping scores of 50-plus have been conceded. Most coaches lose their jobs with a 32 percent win rate so it's progress rather than cause for a party.

Larkham is frank when he admits he is a far more rounded coach than when last coaching the Brumbies (2014-17) and running the Wallabies' attack (2015-19).

"You coach 30 games a year in Europe in all sorts of conditions so it's two seasons in one compared to Super



**PLAYING
ANY KIWI
SIDE IS ALWAYS
A CHALLENGE.'**

**- BRUMBIES COACH
STEPHEN LARKHAM.**





**THE WARATAHS
HAVE MADE A
BIG SHIFT IN THE RIGHT
DIRECTION AND I THINK
THEY'LL BE STRONGER
AGAIN.'**

-DAVE RENNIE



Nemani Nadolo joins the Waratahs after running over the best of Britain and Europe with Leicester Tigers.



Rugby,” Larkham said.

“Dealing with squads upward of 60 players, the greater emphasis on kicking and set piece, perspective from afar...things like that have opened my eyes and given me the opportunity to come in with a better plan for some refinements.

“The intensity with which the Brumbies played in 2022 is something that isn’t going to change.”

Dave Rennie, before he was sacked as Wallabies coach, had spelt out the importance of trans-Tasman rugby in a Rugby World Cup year.

“The competition looks really exciting and a couple of alterations to the laws (to speed up the game) are really positive.

“The Waratahs have made a big shift in the right direction and I think they’ll be stronger again. They recruited well. The Brumbies, Reds and the other sides will be better too so the expectation is they’ll build on the last few seasons.”

One recruit impossible to miss at the Waratahs is Fijian colossus Nemani Nadolo. While many, including him, might have thought his stint with English club Leicester was his last in the big time, the Waratahs have targeted his size, leadership and experience as X-factor.

At 34, the wing is likely to hurl his 130kg frame around as both super-sub and starter. Even a hint of his 27-try form for the Crusaders (2014-16) will make him a handful.

After conceding 40 tries in five clueless games against Kiwi teams in a rock-bottom 2021, the Waratahs made the biggest improvement of any side in 2022. The 8-6 ledger included victories over the Crusaders and Highlanders and only Zarn Sullivan’s magical field goal beat them against the Blues.

The Reds were the most disappointing of the Australian sides against Kiwi opponents in 2021-22 simply because so much was expected of Brad Thorn’s team.

A single victory over the Chiefs in Townsville in 2021 is all there is to show for 11 games against Kiwi teams since the major COVID pause.

Losing scrum dominator Taniela Tupou for the entire Super Rugby Pacific season with a ruptured Achilles may already be the end of the club’s hopes of a top four finish.

Strangely, having flyhalf James O’Connor, No.8 Harry Wilson and winger Vunivalu on the outer with the Wallabies means they’ll see whole

seasons from three high-impact players.

“Obviously, the last few years we’ve had really good starts against the Australian sides and burnt off later in the season against the Kiwi teams. That hurts a lot knowing we are good enough to beat them,” Wilson said.

“There’ll be people already saying that the Reds can’t win without Taniela. This is a chance for us to prove that wrong.”

It was one of the indictments of the 2022 season that the eighth and final spot in the play-offs went to a team with a 4-10 win-loss record.

The Highlanders limped into the play-offs after one of their worst seasons. Just as perversely, the Western Force (4-10) lost and lost as well and only just missed out on the top eight.

The Force have had a shake-up. It has started at the top with the club opting for a Kiwi flavour to their head coach for the first time since former All Blacks boss John Mitchell piloted the club’s first five seasons (2006-10).

They have lost a chunk of experience and on-field chat. Veteran former All Blacks Richard Kahui and Jeremy Thrush, now pursuing coaching at

Academy level, have retired but there is still an important Kiwi thread to the squad.

Former Hurricanes finisher Chase Tiatia has been picked up by the Force and coach Simon Cron is already impressed.

“We lost the rugby intellect of three great humans with Richard, Jeremy and (former Wallaby prop) Greg Holmes retiring so it’s great to have recruited Chase,” Cron said.

“He adds a massive voice to the backline. He always plays with energy, moves wells and he’s a leader. I expect he’ll give the team all of that.”

Cron grew up in Christchurch and arrived in Perth after coaching Toyota Verblitz in Japan where former All Blacks coach Steve Hansen was a consultant.

“Steve is an amazing person when it comes to looking at an overall team and what you need with team set-up, skillsets and structure. He always had brilliant answers and insights on the elements you need and, of course, some of that flows into how I think about the Force.”

Conceding 50 points to the Chiefs, Highlanders and Crusaders in a crazy

May last year was no endorsement that the Force had bridged any gap yet they bounced straight into two of the club’s best wins over Moana Pasifika and the Hurricanes.

“Statistically, you’d say it looks like the Australian sides have closed the gap a little on the NZ sides but only consistent performance in 2023 will prove that...win on win, year on year,” Cron said.

The Melbourne Rebels finished the 2022 season with a 31-30 win over the Highlanders but when injury-ravaged they were mutilated 71-28 by the Blues.

Only with their best on the field do the Rebels have a chance at rattling opponents with the “fast thinking and fearless” style urged by coach Kevin Foote.

“What I grew up loving was really skilful Australian rugby and I want the Rebels to find that again,” Foote said.

“I pay massive respect to NZ rugby but we’re not scared. I do feel the gap is not as big now with the Kiwis. Getting the physical and breakdown aspects right, without sloppy turnovers, is what we need to compete with them...and us playing good rugby two games in a row.”



Former Hurricanes outside back **Chase Tiatia** has joined the Western Force.

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STAYING IN LOVE

THE STREAMERS ARE GONE, THE PARTY IS OVER. WORLD CUP TITLE NO6 IS PART OF HISTORY. THE CHALLENGE NOW IS TO ENSURE THE POPULARITY OF THE WOMEN'S GAME ISN'T CONFINED TO BIG TOURNAMENTS. **RIKKI SWANNELL** HAS THE STORY.

Hannah Porter knows how to win World Cups. A winner of two as a player, she oversaw the victorious 2017 Black Ferns campaign and, after being parachuted in from her role at High Performance Sport NZ at the start of 2022, managed the stunning triumph at last year's tournament.

Now she's taking on what may be one of the most important new roles in New Zealand Rugby as head of women's high performance. She's tasked with ensuring that both the Black Ferns Fifteens and Sevens teams keep winning while also putting in place the building blocks to cement the future of the women's game. It's a big role, broad in scope, but one for which Porter has a firm approach in mind.

"We in New Zealand are really, really good at campaigning but we haven't quite filled out the pathway yet with people in roles and also pathways for players and staff. So, I see my role as leading that change in the pathway and making sure that we're building out the sustainability of those two Black Ferns campaigns."

It's an astute appointment by New Zealand Rugby. Porter is steeped in the game and has a rugby CV to match her passion for it. She played 22 tests for the Black Ferns and six tournaments for the Black Ferns Sevens, including the 2009 World Cup, while off the field Porter has had stints managing both of

those teams, coaches her kids' sides and sits on the board of North Harbour Rugby. Her role as a Performance Team Leader at HPSNZ saw Porter working with top level athletes from canoe slalom, hockey, football and cricket, but the opportunity to return full time to the game she loves proved too hard to resist, even though there were some "good" conversations first about the structure and resourcing that would be in place to support her.

At the heart of Porter's plan is people; ensuring the right people are in the right places, and they are dedicated full time to women's rugby.

"We just don't have many people working in the women's game, right? If you look at the men's game from a New Zealand Rugby leadership point of view, we've got a couple of people in development, we've got a couple of people at talent identification, and we've got a head of the programme, Mike Anthony, who I will work alongside, and we'll aim to grow people to be actually working full time jobs in women's rugby. We used to be able to do it a little bit piecemeal in that someone could hold a job in men's rugby and work across women's rugby at the same time, but with the way that the game is going and how we need to shift it to keep moving forward, we need people to have full time focus on the woman."

As she gets her feet under the desk, Porter is keen to get three key roles established – a campaign manager for both the Black Ferns Sevens and Fifteens teams, a sevens pathway manager and a fifteens development role. Whomever is appointed to those jobs will in turn support the Aupiki squads and staff, the performance hubs that are run for the Black Ferns and the Farah Palmer Cup provincial unions.

Of late, the Black Ferns Sevens have plucked teenagers from high school and put them straight into the professional environment, but the success of a handful of players and the continued winning ways of the team have papered over a complete lack of pathway to sevens, exacerbated by the disestablishment of the national tournament. Porter is acutely aware that there needs to be more stepping stones in both forms of the game before young players get to national teams, rather than being chucked into the upper echelons straight away.

“We kind of have to attack it from both ends, because we also have to make sure that our teams in black are still performing. So how do we actually sustainably grow out the pathway to make sure they are always going to get people coming through and that we’re developing for people on the women’s side of the game? I think that’s probably one of the most important parts of this role; we need to actually provide a pathway for our people working in women’s rugby as well as for players.”

There’s also the not insignificant matter of finding a replacement for Wayne Smith as Black Ferns coach, a process which is underway, as well as locking in international fixtures. Porter says although it sounds like they harp on about having a calendar in place, it’s critical to the long-term success of the Black Ferns and therefore what happens below them. Having an established calendar of fixtures creates commercial and marketing opportunities, ticket sales and supply for the hopefully continued demand. World Rugby is due to announce fixture details for its new WXV competition shortly, meaning for the first time ever the Black Ferns will likely have a full slate of test matches mapped out through until the 2025 World Cup.

There’s been many a new dawn in women’s rugby and Porter knows there will be a clamour to get everything done yesterday, people with high expectations and more scrutiny than



Kiwis support the women’s game in campaigns like World Cups and Olympics, but more is needed to ensure the popularity remains in between those tournaments.



Hannah Porter won two World Cups with the Black Ferns and two more as part of the management.





ever. But she is a considered, measured person and has a proven track record as one of our leading sport's management experts

"We've got to be careful about making comparisons to the men's game and allow the women's game to progress, and learn and fail along the way. I think people forget sometimes just how young we are at professionalising the women's game – we may be 11 years into it in sevens but in the fifteens game we're less than 12 months into being professional.

"In five, six years, we're going to have this amazing product across New Zealand with a huge number of athletes playing in it, but we have to allow it to get to that space because it's not an overnight fix. It'll take a full [World Cup] cycle to be able to get a really good group of people working in the women's game that can make it sustainable."

She will downplay the significance of her role in last year's extraordinary Black Ferns World Cup win, but ask anyone about the unsung heroes of the recovery and campaign, and Hannah Porter's name will come up time and again. That victory showed Porter what can be achieved when women in rugby are given the tools to thrive but it's now on all of them to give more people those opportunities on and off the field.

"If women are allowed to showcase and be in an environment or create an environment where they feel really comfortable, that allows those ideals we saw from the Black Ferns to shine through.

"So we need to make sure that whatever kind of model and environments we're creating can harness that power."

 **PEOPLE FORGET HOW YOUNG WE ARE AT PROFESSIONALISING THE WOMEN'S GAME. IN FIFTEENS WE ARE LESS THAN 12 MONTHS INTO BEING PROFESSIONAL.'**







**LIANA
MIAKELE-TU'U**

SHIFTING FOCUS

LIANA MIKAELE-TU'U WAS A STAR FOR THE BLACKS FERNS AT LAST YEAR'S WORLD CUP BUT HAS QUICKLY SHIFTED HER ATTENTION TO THE BLUES AND SUPER RUGBY AUIKI. **RIKKI SWANNELL** WITH THE STORY.

If there's any hint of concern as to how a young generation of players will handle the pressure of expectation and opportunity that lies ahead for the women's game, then spending 20 minutes talking to Liana Mikaele-Tu'u would quickly allay any such fears. She's a World Cup winner and seemingly has the rugby world at her feet, but she's also simply a 20-year-old who is living her best life as a professional athlete.

That's not to say any of it has come easy or she's taking anything for granted, but this dynamic loose forward is for now, enjoying the ride as she gears up for her second season as a pro and what will likely be a lengthy international career ahead.

Mikaele-Tu'u says she's not someone who dwells too long on a moment in time and perhaps it's why she's been able to absorb everything that has come with the Black Ferns win, both



**THERE'S
NOTHING
MORE HUMBLING
THAN COMING
HOME AND
HAVING TO DO
THE WEEDING!'**

Liana Mikaele-Tu'u debuted for Hawke's Bay while still at school before shifting to Auckland and playing for the Storm.

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good and bad, relatively quickly.

Heading home to Hawke's Bay over summer helped immensely.

"It was a crazy, unbelievable time, so probably going home was my biggest way to download and decompress from the World Cup. Besides, there's nothing more humbling than coming home and having to do the weeding!" She laughs. "I was surprised though at how much I missed everyone after all that time together during the tournament, but don't tell them that."

The "bad" of the World Cup for Mikaele-Tu'u was missing the final. Having established herself as a first choice loose forward, she was in superb form before injuring her thumb in the first half of the semi-final against France and had to sit in the stands with her arm in a sling during that epic final against England.

"I was heartbroken initially and cried and cried. But to be honest, I kinda got over it in the week leading up to the final because I just feel like at 20 years old and to have been able to play in a World Cup and play all the games I did, that I still had heaps to be proud of. So even though I was injured, I was still part of the team and still helped the team to where we got."

Her rise to becoming such a key cog for the Black Ferns has been rapid, but it was actually the Silver Ferns Mikaele-Tu'u was initially set on.

"I loved netball. I really did think I was going to be a Silver Fern until maybe year 13 or my senior years in high school where I just stopped enjoying it. I wanted to keep playing because my parents had put a lot of money into me to play netball but when we talked about committing to rugby instead I told them if I was going to do something I was going to do it well."

She'd also seen the places rugby could take people through her brothers Marino and Antonio, who she cites as her biggest influences, and so, under the watchful eye of Black Ferns legend and her Hastings Girls' High School teacher Emma Jensen, Mikaele-Tu'u did indeed "do rugby well". She played alongside Jensen for the Hawke's Bay Tui in the Farah Palmer Cup while still at college before moving to Auckland to study physiotherapy and join up with the Storm team, where she was immediately earmarked for higher honours. Mikaele-Tu'u found the move and the juggle tough, but it gave her a lot of resilience, particularly after suffering a terrible broken leg playing in the FPC.

"I was studying full time physio out





Liana has been inspired in rugby by her brothers **Marino**, pictured, and **Antonio**.



Liana Mikaele-Tu'u starred for the Black Ferns at the World Cup before breaking her thumb in the semi final against France and missing the final against England.



on the North Shore and at that time I didn't have a car so I would finish my classes around 5pm and then take a bus to the city and then a train to College Rifles. I was probably crying every week because I was stressed from uni, trying to do my best playing rugby, I missed my family, it was my first time away from home so cooking for myself and all those things. But I look at those struggles as a blessing, and I mean, the struggles were a bus and a train and some girls don't even have teams to play for," Mikaele-Tu'u reflects.

What the move to Auckland from Hastings did show her however was what she probably already knew in the back of her mind - that she could more than match it with players from the big smoke. Having first started playing as a 16-year-old Mikaele-Tu'u was a Black Fern at 19. She made her debut on the ill-fated tour to the northern hemisphere in 2021, coming off the bench in the first test against England before starting the next three and impressing each week in a team well beaten. The fall out from that tour is well-worn, but Mikaele-Tu'u was one of several who made their debut over those four weeks and went on to have a significant impact on the World Cup success.

As she prepares for the second, albeit first full season, of Super Rugby Aupiki, Mikaele-Tu'u is confident everyone involved is ready to elevate the competition and women's game to the next level, springboarding off what was seen at the World Cup. She believes the Blues, although young, are going to be a physically dominant team and "we have Lu and I'd follow her any day" she says of Black Ferns captain and World Rugby Player of the Year Ruahei Demant.

"Every team is full of good players, ones who have been superstars for a while that New Zealand is now finding out about. Everyone is keen to have a crack at each other, which is cool because we can see that the game is growing and everyone is getting better, so it would be a shame to not to step it up from last year."

When she uses the term superstar, you get the feeling Liana Mikaele-Tu'u doesn't include her own name in that group. At this stage of her career, she tends not to overthink her own place in the history that did and will continue to unfold, instead she's doing exactly what the Black Ferns did throughout the World Cup – relishing every second of it.



HEAD COACH:
WILLIE WALKER

 25 FEB 4.45PM FORSYTH BARR STADIUM, DUNEDIN ROUND 01	 4 MAR 2.05PM NORTH HARBOUR STADIUM, NORTH SHORE ROUND 02	 11 MAR 4.35PM SKY STADIUM, WELLINGTON ROUND 03	 SEMI FINALS 19 MAR NORTH HARBOUR STADIUM, NORTH SHORE GRAND FINAL 25 MAR FMG STADIUM WAIKATO, HAMILTON
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2023 DRAW // BLUES



HEAD COACH:
CRYSTAL KAUA

 25 FEB 2.05PM LEVIN DOMAIN, LEVIN ROUND 01	 4 MAR 2.05PM NORTH HARBOUR STADIUM, NORTH SHORE ROUND 02	 11 MAR 2.05PM FMG STADIUM WAIKATO, HAMILTON ROUND 03	 SEMI FINALS 19 MAR NORTH HARBOUR STADIUM, NORTH SHORE GRAND FINAL 25 MAR FMG STADIUM WAIKATO, HAMILTON
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2023 DRAW // CHIEFS MANAWA



HEAD COACH:
VICTORIA GRANT

 25 FEB 2.05PM LEVIN DOMAIN, LEVIN ROUND 01	 4 MAR 4.35PM ORANGETHEORY STADIUM, CHRISTCHURCH ROUND 02	 11 MAR 4.35PM SKY STADIUM, WELLINGTON ROUND 03	 SEMI FINALS 19 MAR NORTH HARBOUR STADIUM, NORTH SHORE GRAND FINAL 25 MAR FMG STADIUM WAIKATO, HAMILTON
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2023 DRAW // HURRICANES POUA



HEAD COACH:
BLAIR BAXTER

 25 FEB 4.45PM FORSYTH BARR STADIUM, DUNEDIN ROUND 01	 4 MAR 4.35PM ORANGETHEORY STADIUM, CHRISTCHURCH ROUND 02	 11 MAR 2.05PM FMG STADIUM WAIKATO, HAMILTON ROUND 03	 SEMI FINALS 19 MAR NORTH HARBOUR STADIUM, NORTH SHORE GRAND FINAL 25 MAR FMG STADIUM WAIKATO, HAMILTON
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2023 DRAW // MATATU



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THE QUIZ



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1. There have been 6 “versions” of Super Rugby played since 1996, where NZ teams participated. Which team has won 5 of those titles?
2. “Super Rugby” was in its’ 12th year before a South African team won the title. What year and which team?
3. The Bulls is the team from SA with the most “Super” titles with 4. What team is next best?
4. The Australian team with the most number of “Super” titles is the Brumbies with 3 wins. Which Australian team is next and how many titles?
5. The Central Vikings was an amalgamation of Hawkes Bay and Manawatu and played in the 2nd Division of the NPC in 1997 and 1998. They played a total of 24 games over 2 seasons and won how many?
6. The top points scorer for the Vikings amassed 382 points, but tragically died at age 38. Who?
7. Two father and son combinations represented the AB’s and 2 different “Super” teams in the same eras, being the Blues and Crusaders, the fathers in the 1990’s and the sons are current players. The Crusader father also captained the AB’s. Name them?
8. Dave Rennie played once for another country. What was that team?
9. Eroni Clarke played 51 games for the Blues and 2 for another franchise. Name the franchise?
10. Which player for Matatu in the 2023 Super Rugby Aupiki, represented NZ at age grade level in taekwondo, soccer and ultimate frisbee?
11. Fijian wingers have proliferated NZ “Super” teams and have been prolific try scorers. Which Fijian

winger has scored the most number of tries in “Super” rugby and how many tries?

12. When the AB’s played Western Samoa in 1993, 2 backs from Samoa, later played for the AB’s. Name them?
13. Most people can remember the 1st try scorer in the 1st “Super” game in 1996 as Alama Ileremia for the Hurricanes, when they lost to the Blues in a high scoring game, 28 – 36, in Palmerston North. Who else scored a try for the Hurricanes in that game?
14. In 1999, 3 ex AB’s were named in the Japan World Cup team. Name them?
15. Coincidentally, in 1999, Samoa named 3 ex AB’s in their team for the World Cup. Name them?
16. The most appearances for a player representing King Country is 142 appearances by whom?





17. At one point, a player who represented South Canterbury and Otago, was equal top try scorer for the provinces, in one season. Name him?
18. The Otago Highlanders captain for 1996, was the son of a former All Black captain. Name them?
19. The 1982 Maori All Black team that toured to Wales and Spain was captained by a flanker from Wellington. Name him?
20. In the 2014 Super Rugby tournament final, the Waratahs won 33 – 32 over the Crusaders. What was the result of their round robin game?
21. An English rugby league player changed to rugby in 2015 and was named in the England team for the 2015 RWC, then changed back to league, and played in Australia. Name him?
22. In 2001, Waikato played their games at a different venue to normal as the new Waikato Stadium was being constructed. What venue did they play in 2001?
23. The most number of defences of the Ranfurly Shield is 148 by Auckland, and the least number is one defence by 2 teams. Name the latter teams?

24. At the 1991 RWC, the AB's played Scotland in the play off for 3rd and 4th, and won 13 – 6. Scotland fielded a New Zealander in the backline, and a lock forward who sadly passed away in late 2022. Name them?

25. Horowhenua-Kapiti has nurtured many good players who have moved to other unions. Name the player who holds the provincial record for the most points in a season and most points in a single match?



ANSWERS

18. John Leslie and Andy Leslie.
19. Paul Quinn
20. Curiously, because of the format in 2014, they did not play each other before the final.
21. Sam Burgess
22. Seddon Park
23. Bay of Plenty and South Canterbury
24. Sean Lineen and Doddie Weir
25. Carlos Spencer

10. Renee Holmes
11. Waisake Naholo, 46 tries
12. Alama Ieremia and Ofisa "Junior" Tonu'u.
13. No one
14. Graeme Bachop, Jamie Joseph and Rob Gordon
15. Viaga Tuigamala, Stephen Bachop and Pat Lam
16. Phil Coffin
17. Brendon Laney

1. Crusaders
2. 2007, Bulls
3. None
4. Queensland Reds, 2
5. 19
6. Jarrod Cunningham
7. Todd and Ethan Blackadder and Eroni and Caleb Clarke.
8. Cook Islands XV
9. Highlanders



LOOK WHO'S BACK!

EDDIE JONES' REMARKABLE COMEBACK



GENIUS OR MADNESS? **EDDIE JONES** IS BACK AT THE HELM OF THE WALLABIES, REPLACING SACKED KIWI DAVE RENNIE NOT LONG AFTER HE HIMSELF HAD BEEN FIRED BY ENGLAND. **JIM TUCKER** LOOKS AT WHAT IMPACT THIS REMARKABLE COMEBACK COULD HAVE.

Whether Eddie Jones is as effective as the COVID vaccine when jabbed repeatedly into the Wallabies has suddenly become one of the most riveting themes of this World Cup year.

Just like the vaccine, the overwhelming view from Australia is that a masterstroke has been enacted that can only aid the country's entire rugby community. There are also sceptics rolling their eyes that ingesting disinfectants would be a preferable option than a second dose of Eddie.

Former Wallabies skipper Stirling Mortlock is not one of them.

"It's a fantastic coup for Australian rugby and I've no doubt the benefits will be pretty swift," said Mortlock, who was the dagger that Jones plunged into Kiwi hearts at the 2003 World Cup.

"Eddie intrinsically knows the Australian psyche and (pause)...I'd say he knows exactly what it takes to beat New Zealand if his team is good

enough to execute the plan.”

The facts are undeniable whichever way you want to look at it and no matter how much you feel for the sacked Dave Rennie, a largely popular man of integrity and vigour. “Mr 38 Per Cent” is the tag that did him in when Jones unexpectedly came on the open market when dumped by England.

The Wallabies now have a coach with a World Cup record as good or better than most in the tournament’s storied history. He is without peer for masterminding the greatest upsets on this grand stage.

Think the 2003 semi-final in Sydney when the All Blacks were toppled, the “Miracle of Brighton” in 2015 when his Japanese minnows beat South Africa and England ransacking the All Blacks’ 2019 plans in Japan.

Those shaking their heads at Jones having just eight months to perform the impossible by turning a flatlining team, ranked No.6 in the world, into dangerous Cup wildcards don’t know their history.

In 2003, it took him less than four months to transform a team dismantled 50-21 by John Mitchell’s outfit into one that could shock the same All Blacks side 22-10 in a World Cup semi-final on the same turf.

Jones’ methodology of 20 years ago is worth revisiting: “The All Blacks play the game with power, pace and athleticism but sometimes not tactically outstanding.

“When you make them think, you take away some of their power. We minimised their kick return chances, we targeted key players like Justin Marshall and Carlos Spencer, we played to a script they hadn’t read.”

Times change, of course, but so has Jones adapted to law changes, the quirks of referees, the red and yellow card epidemic, scrum time, new attacking ideas and so much more.

His meticulous, zealous 24/7 energy is renowned. He’ll burn out assistant coaches. Some rookies won’t hack the intensity he directs at them to reach limits he knows they must. Others will rage at brutally missing selection.

As was once said of baseball’s Babe Ruth, all the lies about him are true.

The Wallabies have signed a brilliant

mind for five years; one who has picked apart the All Blacks on the game’s biggest stages.

With the Wallabies and England, he has guided six victories over the All Blacks. Who else in history has done that?

Hasn’t the Bledisloe Cup just got a shot of extra interest? Rugby Australia signed a man capable of putting rugby on the back page of newspapers again.

It’s barely believable that Jones is the last Australian coach to win on Kiwi soil.

looking at the British and Irish Lions tour in 2025, a home World Cup in 2027 and the women’s World Cup in Australia in 2029.

“There are fractures in Australian rugby between club, Super Rugby and the Wallabies and if there’s a man who can get everyone on the same path, it’s Eddie.”

Paul chuckled that the current Wallabies don’t know what is about to hit them.

“Some advice. You never go up in the hotel foyer lift between 4.30am-6.30am

after a late night because you never know how early Eddie wakes up,” Paul said.

“I remember going up the fire stairs one time but poor George Smith went to the lift. Who should be in the lift when it opened but Eddie.

“He lets you stew for a few days before the punishment comes.

“He’d say, ‘Mate, are you going to give up drinking? Nah, I want you to keep drinking so I can flog you after each session.’ He did too in ‘extras’ for the offenders after each session.

“Those were the old days but the intensity will still be there in different ways for a few nightmares. Off the field, Eddie can be a cracker of a bloke.”

Wallabies great Matt Giteau echoed the same thought when he tweeted: “Some of the boys won’t know what’s hit them.”

Rugby Australia boss Hamish McLennan revealed that Jones was already on the radar for a major role in 2024. When he became available

earlier, RA couldn’t risk missing his signature because of signing elsewhere.

Jones inherits a team from Rennie with both shortcomings and positives. A strong fighting heart is the most important head start because beating Wales from 21 points down in Cardiff late last year was superb.

Jones was already texting, talking and planning with key people in Australian rugby while still in England in mid-January tidying up the loose ends of life there.

When it was suggested to him that expectations were perhaps muted for the World Cup later this year, Jones responded like every Wallabies’ fan wanted him to.

EDDIE INTRINSICALLY KNOWS THE AUSTRALIAN PSYCHE AND EXACTLY WHAT IT TAKES TO BEAT NEW ZEALAND.’

None of John Connolly, Robbie Deans, Ewen McKenzie, Michael Cheika nor Rennie could not unlock the puzzle that Jones did in his previous term (2001-05).

Jones led the Wallabies to a comprehensive victory, both tactically and in execution, when beating Anton Oliver’s All Blacks at Carisbrook in 2001.

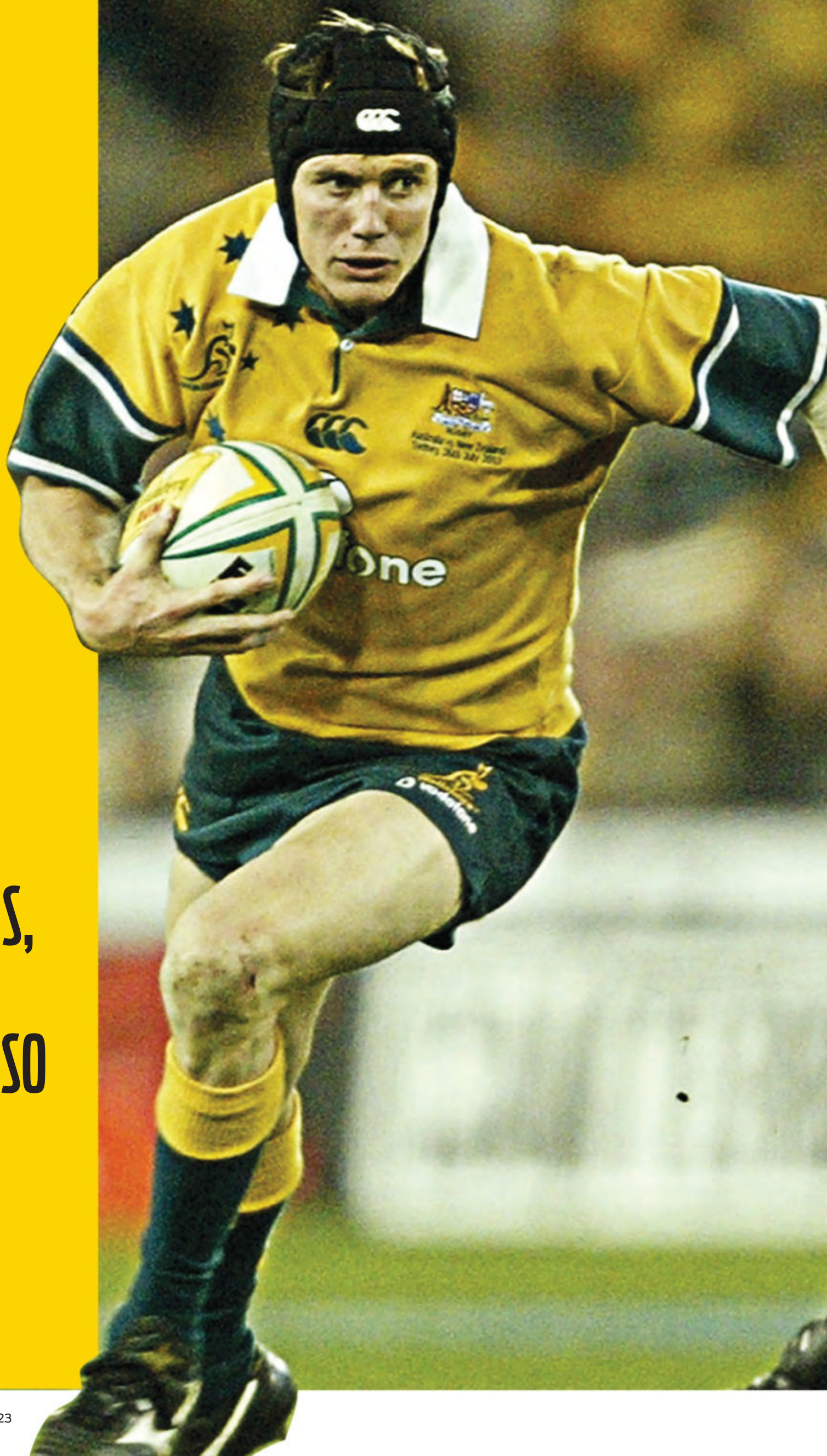
That’s 22 long years ago. And now... “It’s one of Australian rugby’s smartest and most strategic decisions in a long time,” says former Wallabies hooker Jeremy Paul.

“I feel awful for Dave Rennie but it is a results-driven job. Everyone is looking at the next eight months, I’m



Eddie Jones coached England to beat the All Blacks at the 2019 World Cup, and Australia in 2003.

 **EDDIE
JONES
LIKES A FIRST
FIVE WHO RUNS,
AS STEPHEN
LARKHAM DID SO
SUPERBLY.'**







**DAVE RENNIE,
JOHN CONNOLLY,
ROBBIE DEANS, EWEN
MCKENZIE AND MICHAEL
CHEIKA COULDN'T BEAT
THE ALL BLACKS IN NEW
ZEALAND.'**

"I'll tell you mate there's no long term. The whole thing is to win the World Cup in 2023 and we are capable... definitely," Jones said.

"The intensity to how we play, having a really tough hard edge about us...and being a smart team...is what we must have."

It's natural he will see players differently to Rennie. Jones always wants running halfbacks and a first five capable of the same while shrewdly managing the game plan. A first five sitting in the pocket out the back is not his thing.

There are 40-plus players in Australia with a World Cup squad chance and Jones has thrown down the gauntlet in Super Rugby Pacific.

"Use Super Rugby to select yourself, boys. I don't need to premeditate selections although obviously there is historical form," he said.

Picking the right captain to galvanise the troops, sifting through overseas-based players like Will Skelton, Marika Koroibete, Quade Cooper and Rory Arnold, hammering some much-needed discipline into a penalty-prone team, better selections, tweaking his support staff...Jones is in his happy place putting together a new 1000-piece rugby jigsaw.

It's hard not to see a better version of the Wallabies in 2023.

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